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# Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

**M**OST PEOPLE reassess their year on January first; I always do it at tax time. Actually, I'm forced into it. As I sort the receipts, I find myself remembering this trip or that purchase. Sometimes entire days come back to me, and I lose myself in the past. Most often, though, I think about the changes the year has brought — and what those changes mean.

This last year has been a year of major changes for the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed Ferman's decision to concentrate his efforts on publishing the magazine led to a change in editorship. Even though only a few of the stories I've purchased have appeared in the magazine, the placement of stories is slightly different, and so is my choice to do a monthly editorial.

I thought that those would be the only changes we saw this year. I was wrong.

When Ed called me to let me know that Isaac Asimov would not

be able to do any more columns, I was stunned. The science column has been a staple of this magazine as long as I can remember. Dr. Asimov's clean, clear prose has illuminated many a scientific concept for me — and I know that he's done the same for other people. His presence has been part of this magazine for over three decades. And he will be missed.

Ed and I were faced with more than the loss of a columnist, however. We had to make some decisions — and make them quickly. Did we want to continue the science column? Who did we want to replace Dr. Asimov? Could anyone replace Dr. Asimov?

After much discussion, we decided to continue the column. But, we felt, no one could replace Dr. Asimov, and no one should really try. So we batted around a number of names and ideas. We discussed writers who knew science, scientists who could write, and people who would not be intimidated by stepping into Dr. Asimov's shoes.

[We thought of no one who would fit into that final category]. After a lot of conversation, we ended up with two columnists whose names are familiar to our readers: Gregory Benford and Bruce Sterling.

Gregory Benford fits into both of our remaining categories. He is a writer who knows science and a scientist who can write. His first short story appeared in these pages in the 1960s. Since then he wrote over a dozen novels, among them *Timescape* (a Nebula award winner) and his most recent, *Beyond the Fall of Night*, written with Arthur C. Clarke. He has won the Nebula award twice, the John W. Campbell award, and the Australian Ditmar award for best international novel.

Somehow Greg manages to cram his writing in among his other work: he is professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine. He conducts research in plasma turbulence theory and experiment, and in astrophysics. He has published over a hundred scientific papers. His doctorate is from the University of California, San Diego. He was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and a visiting fellow at Cambridge University and the universities of Torino and Florence. He has worked as an advisor to the Department of Energy, NASA, and the White House.

In 1992, *A Galactic Odyssey*, a

television program for which he acted as host and script writer, will air in the United States. Originally, the eight-part series on modern physics and astronomy, produced by Japan National Broadcasting, aired in Japan and Europe. It won the Japanese equivalent of an Emmy for Best Program in 1991.

Greg's articles on science have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Natural History*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook*, *The New Scientist*, and *Omni*. We are proud to have his columns as a regular feature of this magazine.

Our other choice is another well known science fiction writer whose expertise lies in the fringes of technology and science. Bruce Sterling's short fiction has appeared in F&SF since the early 1980s. He has written four science fiction novels: *Involution Ocean*, *The Artificial Kid*, *Schismatrix*, and *Islands in the Net*. He edited the collection *Mirrorshades*, the definitive document on the cyberpunk movement, and co-authored the novel *The Difference Engine* with William Gibson. His non-fiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Whole Earth Review* and *Interzone*, to mention only a few.

Bruce has just finished his first non-fiction book, *The Hacker Crackdown*. The book describes the 1990 struggle between computer hack-

ers, corporate security, and federal law-enforcement officials that led to the start of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Bruce will use his expertise in this and other areas to provide a slightly different look at the way science and technology influence our everyday life. We believe that Bruce's lively prose and strong opinions will make a great addition to the magazine.

Greg's first column appears in this issue. Bruce will debut in the

next month or so. I'm not yet sure about the pattern of the columns [two Greg and a Bruce? Greg, Bruce, Greg, Bruce? Six Bruce, Five Greg?]. As you can tell, the changes will continue for a while.

It will be hard to get used to F&SF without Isaac Asimov. I only hope that the changes we finally decide upon will be as powerful and enduring as those which he has wrought on this magazine, science fiction, and the world itself.



NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME,  
MORT WONDERS IF HE'S IN THE RIGHT LINE

*Ray Vukceovich is a mild-mannered graduate student working in the area of artificial intelligence. He says language fascinates him, hence his interest in computers and his interest in fiction. His first short stories were published in Pulphouse. He has made another sale to Aboriginal SF. This off-beat little tale marks his first appearance in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.*

# Mom's Little Friends

**By Ray Vukceovich**

**B**ECAUSE HE wouldn't understand, we left Mom's German shepherd Toby leashed to the big black roll bar in the back of Ada's pickup truck, and because Mom's hands were tied behind her back and because her ankles were lashed together, we had some trouble wrestling her out of the cab and onto the bridge.

My sister Ada rolled her over — a little roughly, I thought — and checked the knots. I had faith in those knots. Ada was a rancher from Arizona and knew how to tie things up. I made sure Mom's sweater was buttoned. I jerked her green-and-white housedress back down over her pasty knees. I made sure her boots were tightly tied.

The breeze sweeping down the gorge made the gray curls above her forehead quiver. The wind seemed to move the steel bridge a little, too, but that may have been my imagination. Even from up here, I could smell



the river and hear its gravelly whisper. Blackbirds circled and complained in the clear blue sky above us. The sun was a hot spotlight in the chilly, thin mountain air. Toby paced back and forth in the truck bed, whining and pulling at his leash and watching us closely.

"What about the glasses, Barry?" Ada tapped a fingernail on the lenses of Mom's fragile, wire-rimmed glasses.

"Please don't do this, children."

"Shut up, Jessica." Ada spoke, not to our mother, but to Mom's interface with her nanopeople. When Dr. Holly Ketchum (Mom, that is) introduced a colony of nanopeople into her own body, it was seen by many as a bold new step. It had, after all, never before been done under controlled conditions. Nanotechnology held such promise — long life and good health, a kind of immortality, really.

So, how did it work out? What one word would sum it all up?

Well, "whoops" might be a good choice.

The problem was that after a few generations — that is to say, after a few hours — the nanopeople became convinced that their world shouldn't take any unnecessary chances. It made no sense to the nanopeople to let their world endanger herself. Jessica claimed that, individually, nanopeople were as adventurous as anyone else. "But put yourself in our place, Barry," she'd once said to me. "Would you let your world put sticks on her feet and go speeding down a snowy mountain at sixty miles an hour? Or swim with sharks? Be reasonable."

Mom looked like a TV grandmother these days — plump, rosy cheeks and translucent white skin. Her nanopeople could have fixed her vision easily enough, but they thought the glasses would make her more cautious in most situations. They could have left her appearance at its natural forty-eight years or even made her look younger, but they chose this cookie-cutting, slow-shuffling granny look to discourage relationships that might turn out to be dangerous. They could have left her mind alone; instead, they struck her silly. A slow-moving, stupid world is a world that takes no chances.

Jessica had been created to explain things to Mom. She was really a network of nanopeople working in shifts to produce the illusion that called itself Jessica. The nanopeople — invisible, sentient, self-replicating robots of nanotechnology — simply thought more quickly than big people. If Mom were struggling to access a multisyllabic word, there could

be a week's worth of shift changes among the nanopeople running the Jessica interface. In fact, a nanoperson could come into existence, grow up, get trained, find a mate, write poetry, procreate, rise to the top of a career, screw up a relationship, get cynical, and die in the time it took Mom to cook up a batch of brownies.

The real horror, I suppose, was that while individual nanopeople might come and go, as a society, they intended to keep Mom alive and stupid pretty much forever.

I plucked the glasses from her face. "I'll save these for you, Jessica, just in case you ever need them again." I gave her a look I hoped was menacing, and let my remarks just sit there for a moment, then I sat Mom up and leaned her against the bridge railing. "There's still time for negotiation, Jessica," I said.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Barry." Jessica was doing what the nanopeople thought was Mom's voice. I wasn't fooled. Mom never whined. Not the old Mom, anyway. At least we had the nanopeople's attention these days. At first, Jessica had not bothered to even acknowledge our existence. Then we started pushing Mom into water over her head, and Jessica decided to talk to us.

I tied the big rubber bands to Mom's boots.

"The word is *bungee*, Jessica," Ada said.

My sister was becoming one scary chick, I thought, what with her horse tattoo and western hat and the ever-present toothpick in the corner of her mouth. It was almost like she was enjoying this. Or maybe she was just a better actor. I remembered how she'd cried on the phone the night she called me home from graduate school in Oregon, how she kept saying Mom had nothing on her mind but cookies — cookies and cakes and those little flaky things with sweet red crap in the middle — and I need your help, Barry; I can't do this alone, Barry. I'd gotten verbal assurance from my adviser in the physics department that I could take a leave of absence, and had bussed to Tucson the very next day.

Mom made me a pie when I got home.

I took Mom under the arms, and Ada grabbed her feet. We swung her like a sack of laundry, and on the count of three, tossed her over the side of the bridge. Toby went crazy, barking and pulling at his leash in the back of Ada's truck.

We put our hands on the bridge rail and watched Mom fall and fall

toward the river, the long bungee bands trailing behind her, and listened to her scream — well, listened to someone scream, anyway; when it was Jessica, it was a howl of frustration and terror, but when it was Mom, it was an exuberant whoop! Or maybe I was imagining things. Maybe I didn't have the faith Ada had in this plan to get the nanopeople out of Mom.

We watched Mom bounce like a yo-yo on the end of her bungee bands, her housedress hanging down over her head. We decided to let her swing awhile. Ada unpacked our picnic lunch, and we settled down on the bridge to eat.

As we munched and sipped, I heard a small voice calling, "Help, help," but I decided to ignore it.

"So, Ada," I said. "How come Mom's nanopeople don't transform her into something that can climb up the rubber bands? A giant spider, say."

"I call the answer to that my King Kong theory," Ada said. "I'll bet the nanopeople can see in Mom's memory that picture of Kong on the Empire State Building with all the airplanes buzzing around and shooting. Or some other picture like that. The thing with these guys is safety first and always."

Those faraway cries for help were getting to me. I gave Ada a sidelong glance. I didn't want my big sister to think I was wimping out on her. "So, shall we pull her up?" I tried to sound casual.

"I suppose." Ada took another bite of her sandwich, then tossed it into the basket.

We pulled Mom up.

"So Jessica," Ada said. "You want to do that again?"

"No!"

"Let's talk, then."

Jessica let Mom's chin fall to her chest and was quiet for a minute or so. Then she raised Mom's head. "What do you want? How can we make you stop this?"

"Get out of Mom!" I shouted, and Ada gave me a sharp look. I had no talent for diplomacy.

"That's pretty much what we want, Jessica," Ada said. "We need to discuss the terms of your eviction."

"That is an absurd notion," Jessica said. "Each one of us lives a life every bit as important and significant as yours, Ada. You just move more slowly. You're just bigger. None of that signifies. Have you no empathy?"

# I took Mom under the arms, and we tossed her over the side again.

---

Holly is our world. This is the only world the People have ever known. Just where do you suppose we could go?"

"We have an idea about that." Ada signaled me with her eyes.

I got up and walked to the truck and untied Toby's leash. With a great leap of joy, he bounded out of the bed of the truck. Tail wagging, trying to look everywhere at once, nose to the ground, nose in the air, he dragged me back to Mom and Ada. I convinced him to sit down in front of Mom. Taking advantage of the fact that she was tied up, he licked her face. I often wondered whether the dog knew this was Mom. He seemed to like this dowdy little person, but this person was always around these days, and it seemed to me his enthusiasm for her was somehow of a lower quality than the worship he had always had for Mom. Maybe he'd just gotten used to Jessica.

"We want you to move to Toby," Ada said.

Toby's ears stiffened at the sound of his name, and he looked up at Ada.

Jessica was quiet for a moment. Then she made Mom's soft grandmother mouth a hard line. "You want us to move into a dog?" She sounded incredulous.

"You got it," Ada said.

"You want an entire civilization, billions of us, each with definite ideas and hopes and dreams, to just shuffle off to another world? You think that generations of tradition and deeply felt religion and philosophy can be tossed aside? You think we'll move into a dog?"

"I think she's got it," Ada said.

"We won't do it," Jessica said. "And we won't discuss it further." She closed Mom's mouth and squeezed Mom's eyes tightly shut.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" I yelled.

"Never mind, Barry." Ada grabbed Mom's feet and gave me a sharp look.

I got the message. I took Mom under the arms, and we tossed her over the side again. Toby just sat there for a moment like he couldn't believe his eyes, then he jumped up and put his front paws up on the railing and watched Mom bounce.

When we pulled her up this time and propped her against the bridge railing, I looked closely at her wild eyes, hoping, I guess, for a little momness. Not a chance. It was clear we'd finally pissed off her little friends. Big things were happening in Mom. Her face twisted into a horrible grimace, her cheeks puffed out, and her eyes bulged. She suddenly spit a huge stream of green stuff at us. We jumped out of the way.

"She's mine." The voice was deep and male, a truly scary demon voice. "You can't have her."

"Ah, Jessica," Ada said. She took off her cowgirl hat and used it to swat Mom on the side of the head. "We've seen those movies, too. If you're not going to be serious, we're going to throw you over again."

"You don't know what you've done," Jessica said in her usual Jessica voice. "There have been uprisings since we talked last. People have died. Listen to me, Ada. Barry. People have died. People every bit as real as you. Good people. How can you continue this?"

"But you're destroying our mother!" I said.

"One person for the good of billions! And besides, she's not destroyed."

"This one person is our mother," Ada said. "And that's where you're in trouble. We won't quit. Mom would rather be dead than stupid. Let's throw her over again, Barry."

"Wait!" Jessica said. "That's not true. What you just said. You forget we're inside here. We have access that you don't have. We talk to Holly all the time. We're not monsters. Holly is our Mother World."

"Then why do you keep her stupid?" Ada asked.

"Not stupid." Jessica sounded sincere, but I didn't buy it. "Content. Holly is our mother, but she is also our child to be guided, much as you mold and guide your own world."

I could have told her a thing or two about how well we molded and guided our own world, but suddenly that seemed as if it might work against us. I kept my mouth shut.

"Our solution is perfect," Ada said. She put her hand between Toby's ears and scratched. "What do dogs do but lie around all day, anyway? You could keep him as fat and lazy and silly as you want."

"That will simply never happen," Jessica said. "We will never be able to convince all of the people. In fact, we will be able to convince very few. If you throw Holly off the bridge again, you could cause a war in here. I want

you to think carefully. It won't be nice if there is artillery shelling going on in your mother's lungs. Hand-to-hand combat in her stomach. Sword-play in her heart. There will be cell damage. We are fighting for our very world. Would you destroy an entire people, an entire world, for your Mother?"

"Yes," Ada said at once.

I was glad I didn't have to answer that one. I didn't ever want to think about it.

"And what will you do, Ada, if you force our society into a state of primitive savagery?" Jessica said. "How do you think Holly will like having little bands of hunter/gatherers roaming around in her liver?"

"If her mind is free, she'll be able to handle her liver."

"We won't move to a dog," Jessica said, and then she was quiet.

Ada took her feet. "One more time, Barry."

"But what about all those people?" I asked.

"Shut up." Ada dropped Mom's feet and wiped tears from her own eyes with a big blue-checked handkerchief from her back pocket. I shut up and took Mom under the arms again.

We threw her over the side. Jessica didn't even scream this time.

We pulled her up after only a few bounces. Ada looked grim, and I feared that this whole business would fail. All those people. I could be honest with myself, at least in little short bursts. I understood how entire lives could be lived in minutes. I knew that Jessica was right when she said the nanopeople were as real as I. I understood that some of them were dying. We rolled Mom over. She looked dead herself, but when I grabbed her wrist, I felt a pulse. Ada sat her up and gently slapped her face over and over again. I scooted back and grabbed a soda out of the picnic basket and poured a little in my hand and flicked it at Mom. No response. Toby pushed his way in between Ada and me and licked Mom's face again.

Some time passed.

Then Jessica opened Mom's eyes.

"So much has changed." Jessica sounded weak, diminished somehow.

"But one thing is still firm. We will not abandon our world."

Ada sighed. I hoped she wouldn't want to toss Mom over the side again.

"We propose a compromise," Jessica said.

"We're listening," Ada said.

"We propose to let Holly have more control over her life," Jessica said.

"We have combed through her memory and have found a set of activities that we feel prepared to tolerate. Ballroom dancing is an example."

Ada's face got absolutely purple. Her hands closed in fists and opened in claws, closed and opened. When she spoke, her voice was steady and cold, but coiled like a spring, cobra tight. "You're telling me that you will allow Dr. Holly Ketchum, a respected physicist and leading authority on nanotechnology, a woman so full of curiosity and life that some people simply have to step out of her light or get burned, a woman vibrating with sexual vitality and gentle, innocent love and openness for almost everyone. . . ." She jumped up and shouted: "A woman who thrives on the adrenaline rush of white water and rock races and free-fall. You're telling me you're going to allow this woman to do ballroom dancing? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Well, yes. Among other things."

"Ada." I grabbed her hand, and the look she turned down on me would have loosened the bowels of a biker. "Let me try," I said. I thought she was going to say something to make me feel small or even hit me, but she jerked her hand away and stomped off to her truck instead. Toby and I watched as she kicked big dents in the door of her truck. When she stopped yelling and slumped to the ground, I turned to Mom and spoke to Jessica.

"If there is to be a compromise, Jessica," I said. "It will have to be on our terms. Or, if you think about that a little, it'll have to be on Mom's terms. You're going to have to learn to live with what your world wants, not what you want for your world."

"Well, we did come up with this list."

"You're going to have to let Mom come out and tell you what she wants."

"But she takes such chances!"

"You'll have to learn to trust her," I said.

Jessica didn't reply, and I was suddenly at a loss. It seemed clear what must happen next, but I didn't know how to convince the nanopeople. I felt a hand on my shoulder and jerked my head around in time to see Ada squat down beside me.

"Barry's right," Ada said. "You must turn inward. You must let Mom take care of the stuff outside. You don't have what it takes to deal with things out here. We can keep throwing you off the bridge until your

society is completely disrupted. If it starts to look like those of you who are left are getting used to bungee, we can do something else. Access Mom's memory of alligator wrestling."

Jessica squinted Mom's eyes for a moment, then jerked her head to the right as if Ada had slapped her.

"Look at ultralight stunt flying," I said, encouraged again by Ada's support.

Jessica jerked Mom's head to the left.

"Do we need to go on?" Ada asked. "We won't quit."

Jessica let Mom's shoulders slump. She sighed. "We'll try it your way," she said. "We'll try it. But strictly on a trial basis!"

"No conditions," Ada said.

Jessica rolled Mom's eyes for a long time, then she said, "You win."

A smile grew on Mom's face, bigger and bigger, until she laughed out loud. "Ada! Barry!" She struggled with the ropes around her wrists. "I knew I could count on you two."

I could see it was Mom — something about the way the body was controlled convinced me Mom was to some degree in charge — but how much Mom was it? I worried that the nanopeople would have her on a short leash.

Toby lunged across my lap to get to her. The entire back end of his body wagged as he licked her face, and he could not contain his joy, to the point that he peed all over me. I didn't know how Ada felt about it, but a Mom real enough to make a dog pee was a Mom real enough for me. I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"Untie me," Mom said, twisting her head this way and that to avoid Toby's tongue.

Ada pushed the dog away and pulled the big blade from the sheath on her belt. She turned Mom around and cut her wrists loose.

Mom's hair turned brown even as she stripped off her sweater. Her eyes cleared; her skin tightened. She pulled the dreary housedress from first one shoulder and then the other and wiggled it down to her hips. She bounced a little and pulled the dress along with her underwear down her thighs and over her knees. Ada undid the bungee boots and pulled them off Mom's feet. Mom's wrinkles disappeared, and her bones straightened. When she stood, nude and magnificent and beaming a big smile at us, she was Mom in body again. Well, in a way. This was Mom, I thought, as she



must have looked at thirty or so. Long reddish brown hair falling over slightly freckled shoulders. Pale blue eyes. Small, high breasts. Long, strong legs.

"Shall we go home, Mother?" Ada asked.

"Not so fast." Mom sat down on the bridge and pulled the bungee boots on again. "I need to pin down just who's boss in here." She climbed up on the bridge rail and, with a wild scream of joy, did a perfect swan dive into the abyss.

We watched the arch of her dive and listened to her yell and watched her bounce.

"Do you suppose we've just postponed things?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you think will happen to her when we've either got nanopeople of our own or we've died? How about then?"

Ada seemed to think about that as we listened to Mom whoop at the upswing of each bounce.

"Well, maybe we'd better pull her up and get some motherly advice," Ada said.



*"Run, run. I have a strong feeling something's gaining on us!"*



# Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

*Soulsmith*, Tom Deitz (Avon/Avo-Nova, paper 449pp, \$4.99)

TOM DEITZ'S first novel, *Windmaster's Bane*, led to his first series, including *Fireshaper's Doom* and four other books. I reviewed the first two with much enthusiasm, for Deitz had done a fine job of mingling a contemporary Georgia setting with some strong and interesting fantasy. The only drawback, I thought, was the fundamental problem that Celtic mythology really had no logical role in America — the result was that, for me at least, these novels were best the *less* they had to do with the Celtic gods and the more they had to do with the rural Georgia high school kids.

I'm happy to tell you that I got my wish. Not with the original series, but with a new trilogy whose first volume, *Soulsmith*, promises that Deitz will follow the direction that brought most value to his work. We're back in the Georgia countryside, in a country that is ... well ... *lucky*. But the source of the

luck is no mystery. It's the Welch family, and most particularly *the* Welch, old Matt, who has a way of doing favors for people. Not that he actually *does* anything directly, mind you. It's just that people sort of get lucky after asking him for help. Things work out. And then they bring him gifts and so you could say *he's* kind of lucky, too.

Only Matt Welch has been getting a little greedy. A little untrusting. These days he insists on setting it up as pre-agreed payments instead of relying on the gratitude of the people he helps. And he has also been messing around with tradition. Instead of planning to have his heir as *the* Welch be his sister's son (or his niece's), he has his own little genetic project going on.

Into this situation comes Ronny Dillon, a boy who has lost everything. First, he had shattered his knee in a diving accident, ending his athletic prowess and leaving him almost certainly a cripple for life. Then his adoptive parents had died in a traffic accident, and he had to go live with his godmother,

his mother's old roommate in college. Her name? Erin Welch. And her son, Lewis, would normally have been Matt Welch's heir. But Ronny knew nothing of that. He only knew that he was almost friendless in this high school, and the only thing he had going for him was a surprising gift that he had never known he had: He really knew how to make things out of metal. He was a born smith.

I can't begin to tell you all that happens from there on — Deitz is wonderfully inventive, both with his characters and with the magic in this tale. You'll never forget the Road Man, I can assure you — a wandering tinker who is powerful and strange, reminiscent both of Tom Bombadil and of the Wizard of Oz. And in the Welch family itself, you can find the kind of majesty mixed with madness that feel like the powerful figures in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* — or like characters in a southern gothic novel.

Most of all, though, I think you'll come to like the teenage kids in this book. Deitz has not forgotten that age when the full growth of adulthood is on you, but you don't quite know yet what to do with it — the age when you feel great power inside you, but can't begin to guess what your role in life might turn out to be. Everything is negotiable, discoverable; and it is also

dangerous and terrible, for no one can really protect you anymore. Indeed, near the climax of this book there is a terrible moment of adolescent frisson, when the child realizes that he is no longer under the protection of his parents, and must choose and act alone for the first time. That will certainly make this novel a hit with high school age readers, but I hope that will be no barrier to older readers like me. After all, most fantasy heroes are adolescents — it's just that Deitz is honest enough to state it openly, instead of pretending that his main characters are grown up.

This is the first book in a trilogy, and when I inquired, the editor told me that while the second book, *Dreambuilder*, exists in draft form, the final book, *Wordwright* is only an outline. I must say, though, that Deitz does a fine job of closing this book. While I certainly would love to know more about the future of the characters, the fundamental issues in *Soulsmith* are *all* resolved by the end. This is not a trilogy where you should wait until the last volume is published before reading the first.

I think what I liked best about this book was the American-ness of it. Beitz has scant debt to Celtic fantasy here. Where the old modes of fantasy touch the story, it's in the life of the kids — metal figurines

like the ones kids use to play fanatical games of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Instead the magic of the Road Man is displayed in weird impossible machines, in revival meeting rhetoric and rituals, in boasting and unpredictability, two of the most wonderful and annoying of American traits. Much as I have loved the finest of the fantasies that echo the European tradition, I'm much more excited about a story that feels like something out of the collective memory of my own people. We have no relics of knights and castles in our landscape — but we do have heaps of rusting metal and roads, both paved and dirt, running off into the woods and hills practically everywhere. This is the world that Deitz is exploring and re-creating with *Soulsmith*, and I'm glad to have spent some hours there in his company.

*The Hemingway Hoax*, Joe Haldeman (Morrow, cloth, 155pp, \$16.95)

Haldeman's novella has already won a slew of awards; it hardly needs my endorsement now. But just in case you've been living with your head in a soundproof box, let me point out that this is Haldeman at his best, in part because this is Haldeman writing contemporary fiction instead of Haldeman writing gung-ho far-future sci-fi. Yes, the

science fiction element is strong, as time travelers labor to prevent some never-named catastrophe (or, perhaps, labor to prevent the *prevention* of a eucatastrophe that they are determined must occur); but stronger still is the life of Hemingway scholar John Baird, a man with an eidetic memory, an old war injury, a lost fortune, a half-faithful wife, and the bad luck to run into a con man who sets him on a path that leads to death — many times over.

The maguffin of *The Hemingway Hoax* is, of course, the hoax itself. As the con man envisioned it, it would be a straightforward fraud: a Hemingway scholar "finds" lost stories by Hemingway which, of course, the scholar wrote himself. Baird is sold on the idea, however, only by thinking of it with a double twist: The hoax will go on only long enough to win endorsements from a few scholars, and then the book will be published as a deliberate Hemingway pastiche that was nevertheless good enough to fool the scholars. Baird's dilemma at first is the simple moral one — if his hoax succeeds, it will seem as though he deliberately set out to humiliate his fellow scholars. But soon enough it becomes quite a different dilemma: How can he keep the time traveler from killing him in timestream after timestream?

Eventually he is going to run out of lives — even as some of his alternate lives seem a great deal more attractive than the “real” life he remembers so clearly.

If any flaw mars this near-*tour-de-force*, it is the irresolute ending. I think I know who ended up winning and how it happened, but like so many authors, Haldeman, perhaps fearing to insult his readers by explaining what must now be obvious, has instead told us far too little for us to be sure that our guesses about what the ending means are accurate. I wish I could reassure all storytellers who suffer from this malady that we readers are not as aware of every detail of plot as the author is; especially we are not aware of how everything leads to the outcome that the author has devised. So we won't be offended, not even the teensiest bit, if you definitively explain what has happened before you type THE END. Those who have already guessed what it all means will feel completely vindicated, which they won't mind a bit, while the rest of us will be pathetically grateful for having been let in on the great secret.

*Black Cocktail*, Jonathan Carroll  
(St. Martin's, cloth, 76pp, \$13.95)

members of a matched set of a certain number? Most people never find the other members of their set, and so they go through life feeling incomplete, always searching. But some are more fortunate, and find their counterparts, fulfilling themselves: They are, in Vonnegut's words, lonely no more.

That is the mad crusade in which the narrator of *Black Cocktail*, Ingram, finds himself. His long-time lover, a man named Glenn, was killed by “the big one” when it finally hit Los Angeles; Ingram thought that his feeling of lostness was because Glenn was gone. Then he meets Michael Billa and strange things start happening. For one thing, Billa tells great stories that have a way of being true — but not necessarily the way Billa told them. Frightening things start happening to Ingram, and no one seems to be able to tell him the straight story about anything.

Everything will all be fine, though, if they can just assemble all five members of their set.

Carroll's strength is his easy evocation of place — in this case, the sunlit, brooding milieu of Los Angeles. With character, he is not as much at ease. He can easily show the grotesque and the eccentric, but finding the complicated heart of more “normal” people is a job he seems not even to attempt, as such

What if people are born as

people either disappear entirely or act for only the most obvious of motives. In this case, though, the adventure is gripping enough and the idea compelling enough to make such faults invisible. This is the kind of horror fantasy that I enjoy. Its object is not to induce nausea, but rather to create that frisson of awe that the world might really be as strange and terrible as *this*.

*Cloven Hooves*, Megan Lindholm (Bantam Spectra, paper, 360pp, \$4.99)

Megan Lindholm's first novel, *The Wizard of the Pigeons*, was a marvel of contemporary fantasy — along with Charles de Lint's, her work defined the true direction of post-King urban fantasy.

*Cloven Hooves*, however, is not so much a contemporary fantasy as it is simply a contemporary novel. Few contemporary mainstream novelists are able to evoke the complexities and contradictions of an entire family — one thinks at once of Ann Tyler, and then finds only a bare handful of others, most of them women, who deserve to be added to the list.

With *Cloven Hooves*, Lindholm puts herself firmly on that list. Her narrator, Evelyn, is a young mother who grew up in Alaska, where she and her husband, Tom, had an almost-idyllic life poised on the

boundary between city and primeval forest. Now, however, she finds herself trying, with more and more desperation, to hold her little family together in Washington, where Tom has brought them to "help out for a while" on his parents' prosperous mega-farm while a brother-in-law recovers from an injury. She has never much cared for her in-laws. Their sense of family is so powerful, so authoritarian, that it swallows up everyone who comes within their orbit — and they have never, never approved of anything about Evelyn herself. She is simply not civilized — at least, not in the way that they define it.

This is not a case of conflict between city and country — nobody here is *urban*, by any stretch of the imagination. Rather it is a conflict between the wild ancient forest and the humans who cut and clear it to plant tame crops, making themselves into domesticated animals in the process. And in Evelyn's life, the wilderness of the forest is embodied by the faun that first came to her when she was a child wandering the woods and meadows of Alaska. In those days there was innocence in their wordless games together, but now, when the faun comes to her again, it is not an innocent game they play at all, but rather Evelyn's renunciation of the

claims of civilization in order to be free (as she imagines) and happy.

In a way, *Cloven Hooves* is really two novels. The Ann-Tylerish part is Lindholm's devastating portrayal of the relentless, bit-by-bit invasion of Evelyn's and Tom's fragile desmesne by Tom's ever-cheerful, well-meaning, and innocent parents. When, finally, a genuine tragedy strikes, a tragedy that is nobody's fault but which would never have happened if Evelyn had not lost all her power over her own husband and child, it is almost inevitable that the blame is twisted around and placed squarely on the one innocent person, Evelyn herself — for of course Tom's family can do no wrong.

The other novel is the tale of Evelyn and the faun. The stories barely intersect for a short time in Washington; when her life with Tom's family ends, we are really beginning a whole new story of her life in the wild.

Yet, unrelated as the stories sometimes *seem* to be, they are the two faces of the same coin. However much Evelyn may think she does not belong in human civilization, she also cannot bear the heartless logic of life in the wild. In neither place can she truly create a home, even though that home is all she ever wanted. She is a woman of the border, and neither of her husbands

— Tom nor the Faun — is able to stay with her there.

Awkward as the structure of *Cloven Hooves* may be (and annoying as Lindholm's decision to use present tense is), the story itself has all the anguish and passion of the finest tragedy and all the mythic resonance of the finest fantasy. And Lindholm's writing of it is rich with the telling details of the finest of contemporary domestic drama. The result of such a melding of traditions as this is too often that the book is ignored by everybody — it is too much of a fantasy for the contemporary fiction audience even to look at it, while the fantasy audience doesn't know what to make of the decidedly unmagical pages of family tragedy.

Don't let yourselves be caught up in that useless contradiction. When you pick up *Cloven Hooves*, set aside your genre expectations and let Lindholm take you along on an unforgettable journey. She has embarked into a territory without rules — a kind of wild fiction, where the trees are not set out in rows and the narrative is as untamed as a hungry animal. It is a fiction that neither can nor should be imitated. But you must experience it, if only to feel again the hard, driving pulse of raw storytelling that is so commonly drained out of more traditional, predictable tales. And, while

women will certainly respond to Lindholm's depiction of a female dilemma, I hope the readers of this book are not *only* women, for in fact the book is at least as much about men — both weak and strong, both tame and dangerous, all at once. It is no accident that both of Evelyn's children are sons.

*Aunt Maria*, Diana Wynne Jones (Morrow/Greenwillow, cloth, 214pp, \$13.95)

Recently I devoted a long review to a summary of most of the works of Diana Wynne Jones. Let me add to that what may be her best novel yet, *Aunt Maria*.

Most young adult fantasy deals with extraordinary children in ordinary families. Jones reverses the equation quite regularly, for her narrator, Mig, and her brother, Chris, are quite normal children in a far from ordinary family. It's bad enough that Dad recently ran off with a bimbo, and *then* managed to get himself killed in a traffic accident when his car plunged off a cliff into the sea. But now, despite Mig's and Chris's best efforts, Mother has got them roped into spending the Easter holidays with Aunt Maria.

Not ma-REE-ah, mind you, but ma-RYE-ah — and don't you forget it (though Aunt Maria herself relentlessly forgets that Mig does not

like being called by her real name, Naomi]. Aunt Maria is the sweetest and dullest old lady — but in the midst of her unending torrent of cheerful babble, she manages to manipulate people into doing *exactly* what she wants at all times. Within hours, Mother is acting as Aunt Maria's house servant, and the children, far from having a holiday by the sea, are part of a rigidly obedient community that has grown up around Aunt Maria.

There is magic here, of course, and soon enough the children run into it headfirst. But what makes this an extraordinarily successful novel is the fact that the magic is always rooted in reality: It consists of power arising out of the different ways that men and women get control of their world. The final confrontation between men's and women's magics is at once comical and disturbing for its very ordinari-ness. You have seen men and women in conflict in exactly this way, and it never felt like magic before!

Yet magic it is, so skillfully woven into the character story that belief in the tale is never strained.

Perhaps there is no better way of letting you see just how wry Jones can be than by telling you that the novel *has* a happy ending, and their father is not quite as dead as they had thought — but the one



fact has nothing at all to do with the other.

*The Shape Under the Sheet: The Complete Stephen King Encyclopedia*, Stephen Spignesi (Popular Culture, Ink, P.O. Box 1839, Ann Arbor MI 48106, cloth, 1991, 780pp)

What can I say, except that as far as I can tell, the title is truthful: This sucker is *complete*. I mean, you could kill rats just by dropping this book on them, it's that heavy.

Now, I've enjoyed many of the works of Stephen King, and I believe his work will last for some time in the American consciousness. But I'm not the kind of fan who wants a virtual concordance to his works. And yet there's a peculiar kind of delight in looking under *Tommyknockers* and seeing a list of people who were at Ruth McCuasland's funeral, or a reference to the t-shirt Jack was wearing on Arcadia Beach (it said "School-lunch Victim"). Under each published work is a box listing the table of contents and the dedication; then there are sections headed *people*, *places*, and *things*.

The book also has a listing of the first lines of all King's books, poems, and stories ("The engine of the old Ford died, for the third time that morning" — from *The After-*

*math*, an unpublished novel — hard to believe there *is* such a thing, isn't it?); interviews with employees, family, friends; examinations of King's juvenilia; comparisons of all the movies based on King writings with the writings they were based on; and here's the strange thing: It's a real kick to go through this book. Part of the fun is thinking, "Somebody actually put all this together." And part of the fun is remembering the particular King piece that's being talked about. Or wondering how these little bits and pieces fit into the books I *haven't* read. For instance, I never got around to reading *It*, but I'm intrigued to know that there was somebody in the book who was referred to as "The Rotting Leper." And that Patty Uris apparently watched a Ryan family on *Family Feud*. And that Willard Scott, the *Today Show* weatherman, is also a character in the book.

I can't find the price in my review copy of the book, but I suspect you can buy a good lawnmower for less. Librarians will want it, of course, but I don't think that this book is really meant for *scholars*. I suspect that if you're part of the audience for this book, all I have to tell you is that it exists, and you'll do the rest.

Pat Cadigan made her first appearance in F&SF in January 1981 ("The Coming of the Doll"). Since then, she has written a number of highly acclaimed stories and several novels. Her next book will be a limited edition from WSFA Press called *Home by the Sea*. Bantam will publish her next mass market book, *Fools*, in their Spectra line. Pat wrote this story in response to a request to do science fiction murder mysteries. "True Faces" will be reprinted later this year in *Whatdunnit?*, an anthology edited by Mike Resnick.

# True Faces

**By Pat Cadigan**

**I** TOLD YOU I wasn't in the mood for this," Stilton whispered.

I gave him an elbow in the ribs without looking away from the body of the woman lying on the floor of the large room. I'm never much in the mood for a strangulation murder myself, but it didn't pay to advertise. Not in this company. History, I thought; I'm looking at history, in the making right there in front of me. People had been strangled before, and they'd get strangled again, but this was the first time one had ever been strangled in an alien embassy. The first alien embassy, no less. Two firsts. And we were the first law-enforcement officers on the scene, so that was three firsts. The day was definitely running hot.

On my other side, the tall man in the retro-tuxedo swallowed loudly for the millionth time. He'd said his name was Farber, and had given his occupation as secretary to the dead woman. I wasn't sure which was more

striking, his old-fashioned getup or his noisy peristaltic action. I'd never met anyone who could swallow loudly before — did that make it five firsts? I shoved the thought aside. The room was so quiet, I probably could have heard him digesting his food if I had listened closely enough. The Lazarians either observed quiet as a religion, or they were as much in shock as the human employees, who were all huddled together on the far side of the room, too spooked even to whisper to each other.

There was only one Lazarian on this side of the room. The rest were gathered in a semicircle around the corpse. There were about twenty of them, and the grouping had this very odd formality to it, as if they'd all gathered there to seek an audience with the woman.

I turned to Farber, who reacted by swallowing again and then blotting his forehead with his sleeve. "One more time?" I gave Stilton another jab in the ribs.

"Ready," Stilton said sourly, moving so that I could see he had the interviewer aimed.

"My God, I always thought it was just in the hollies that the police made you tell a story over and over," Farber said, glancing at the 'viewer's flat lens in a furtive way. I didn't make anything of that — the only people who never got nervous about having a 'viewer trained on them were dead or inhuman. Of course, it was hard to tell with the Lazarians — they looked a lot like scarecrows, and I'd never seen a nervous scarecrow, or even an extraterrestrial facsimile.

"You can give us the 'viewer's digest condensed version," I told him. "The third recording doesn't need as much."

Farber swallowed. "Fine. I came in here and found Ms. Entwater just as you see her now, with the Lazarians gathered around her. Just as you see *them* now. The other human employees were elsewhere in the building, but the one Lazarian rounded them all up, brought them in here, and hasn't allowed anyone to leave since. Then I called you. From here. Since I'm not allowed to leave, either."

I glanced at Stilton, who nodded. "And you say that Ms. Entwater's relationship with the Lazarians was . . . what?"

Swallow. His Adam's apple bounded up and down above his collar. "Cordial. Friendly. Very good. She liked them. She liked her work. If she had any enemies among the Lazarians, she never told me about it, and she told me close to everything."

"Care to speculate on what she didn't tell you?" I asked.

He thought about that for a moment, swallowing. "She didn't tell me there was a Pilot in the building."

"Why not?"

"Either she didn't have a chance, or she didn't think to." Swallow. "It's hardly necessary for the secretary to be updated hourly as to who drops by for a social visit and who doesn't."

"You're sure it was a social visit?"

Swallow. "Pilots come by all the time to visit the Lazarians. The Lazarians trained them in Interstellar Resonance Travel, so they feel a certain kinship to them, much more than to other humans, I think."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because they seldom have any interactions with any of the humans here. Except for Ms. Entwater, who sees them in and sees them out again."

Swallow. "Saw them in. And out again."

She always did, personally? Isn't that more of a job for a receptionist or a secretary?"

"Dallette or I would see to other visits. The Pilots, Ms. Entwater always saw to personally."

"Then she wouldn't have had to tell you in so many words that a Pilot was in the building," I said. "You'd know by whatever she was doing."

Swallow. "If I knew what she was doing, I was busy with press releases for most of the morning, so I was in the translation room."

"The Lazarians' press releases?"

Swallow, followed by a nod. "They like to alert the media themselves. About everything. Today it was various things about hollies they'd seen and what they thought about them and the dissolution of three-bond—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You didn't mention that before." The old ways never failed. Get someone to tell a story over and over, and something new was bound to show up.

"Swallow. "I'm sorry. I wasn't hiding it —" A glance at the 'viewer. "— I'd just forgotten. It's like a — a marriage breaking up, or maybe a long engagement. The Lazarians are — well, there are similarities, but there are always strange little differences embedded in them. In any case, it didn't concern Ms. Entwater."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Absolutely." Swallow. "Ms. Entwater never, ah, intruded into their

private lives."

I couldn't help laughing a little. "Come on. Celie Entwater's job was to gain improved understanding of the Lazarians. How could she do that unless she was acquainted with their private lives?"

"Ms. Entwater considered herself a diplomat engaged in deep study of another culture. She was rigorous in observing customs and taboos, all that sort of thing. She knew that if we offended them, they might close down and go back to Lazarus —"

"Lah-ah . . . ZA-AHR . . . eesh," came a deep, nasal-sounding voice behind me, enunciating each syllable as if it were a separate word, with a bit of a gargle on the ZA-AHR.

Farber swallowed and bowed from the waist. I turned around. The one free-ranging Lazarian in the room was standing as close as possible to Stilton, who rolled his eyes. The Lazarian custom of space density had gotten old for him very quickly. I found it pretty off-putting myself — it was like dealing with a race of people who had been raised in crowded elevators, unable to be comfortable unless they were all on top of each other.

Which made the half-circle formation around Entwater's corpse doubly odd, I thought suddenly. They weren't as close to each other or to her as they could get. Because she was dead? Or for some other Lazarian reason I had yet to find out?

"I need to question all the humans here," I said to the Lazarian. "If one of them killed Ms. Entwater, that person must be punished according to our law."

"Trrrrried and punished if found guilty," the Lazarian corrected. "Question."

Farber moved to my side, swallowing. "Thinta-ah requests permission to inquire something of you," he said to me, sounding ceremonial. I repressed the urge to sigh heavily; I'm no diplomat, and the six years I'd spent on the gang squad had made me tired of ritual. Maybe it should have prepared me for the more Byzantine protocols of extraterrestrials, but I've got a bad attitude. Twenty years ago, when the Lazarians had first arrived, maybe I'd have been much more excited, but then, I've always had low blood pressure anyway.

"Ask your question," I said.

"Say 'please,'" Farber whispered.

I smiled as broadly as I could. "Please."

The Lazarian put its six-digit hands on top of its sacklike head. "If Entwa-ahter is dead by one of us, wha-aht then?"

I glanced at Entwater again. From this distance, it was hard to see the details of the marks on her throat, but they could have been made by one of those Lazarian hands. One would have been enough — like the rest of their limbs, those digits were long and multijointed, and could have gone all the way around a human neck easily. "This is your embassy," I said, "which means that, to us, it is a piece of your nation. We would trust you to serve your own justice in this matter."

Stilton was looking at me as though I was crazy. I didn't blame him. All of a sudden, I was talking like a hollie version of a diplomat. I couldn't help it; something about the Lazarians was making me go into awkward-formal mode.

The Lazarian put a hand on top of the 'viewer, much to Stilton's shock. "Truth ma-ah-chine."

I gave Farber a sidelong glance. "What now?"

Farber swallowed twice. "It would seem that Thinta-ah wants you to use the 'viewer on them." He gestured at the Lazarians standing around Entwater.

Stilton coughed. "I don't think it'll work. We're—ah—" He turned to the Lazarian — "We're too different." I could tell he was trying to imagine how those sackheads would register. The 'viewer worked on interpreting a lot of little things — facial expression, blood flow, temperature, eye and muscle movements, pulse, respiration, vocal quality and inflection, choice of words, context, and some other things I didn't have to bother remembering. It wasn't infallible, we'd all been told, but in my experience, I have yet to see anyone beat it, not even the most hardened pathological liars. We were allowed to use it only to determine probable cause for search and/or arrest, not to determine official guilt or innocence, so it wasn't any more admissible in court than the old lie-detector results had been, but it was useful enough.

"Can converrrrt," said the Lazarian. "Ha-ahve progra-ahms to converrrrt for our species."

Stilton held the 'viewer protectively close to his chest, giving me a desperate look.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd have to call —"

Farber swallowed. "Weren't you told to take every measure necessary to wrap this up as quickly as possible?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Do you want to think about the repercussions of having an unsolved murder in the Lazarian embassy? They'll have to call out the National Guard to protect this place, and all of us *will still be trapped inside* of it. And that includes you and your partner. The door is *booby-trapped*. Something sonic. Break the plane from this side, and you'll drop like a rock. When you wake up, you'll have the worst headache of your life." He jerked his head at the group of humans. "Some of *them* tried it. Ask them if they'll try it again. Get it through your head: no one is going to leave here until this is settled, and if it takes months, that's not Thintah's problem."

"All right," I said. All right for now. Call in a siege team? I'd never get that O.K.'d. I'd have to see about locating the control for the doorway knock-out, and figure out how to disable it later. That would probably cause an international incident — interstellar incident? — but not as major an incident as a siege team storming the place.

I looked at the Lazarian, but that face was unreadable. As usual. It was actually the outer surface of a kind of flexible exoskeleton that covered the whole head, featureless except for irregular, opaque black patches where the eyes and mouth would be. I'd read somewhere that the exoskeleton thickened and then thinned out again on some cycle that was individual to each Lazarian, but no one knew what caused it or what it meant to the Lazarians, except that they referred to what lay beneath it as the "true face," which was never to be shown to another living being, not even if its owner was dead. Which I thought begged the question: what was the point of having a so-called "true face" if nobody could ever see it?

Something teased at the edge of my mind. I looked over at the Lazarians still motionless around the corpse. Was the penalty for seeing a "true face" immediate death?

Everyone was staring at me expectantly. "I should still probably call in for authorization," I said weakly.

"Ca-ahll," said the Lazarian, and it wasn't granting me permission, but giving me an order.

I took the cellular off my belt and punched the speed dial for the direct line to the captain. The subsequent conversation was almost as brief.

"She says it's a go," I said, clipping the phone back onto my belt. Stilton

looked outraged for half a second, and then wiped all expression from his face. For some reason, 'viewer operators get extremely possessive about their baby. Normally Stilton wouldn't even let me hold his. "Let's get the program and convert the 'viewer for Lazarians."

Farber looked distressed as he swallowed. "Well, I've just thought of a problem."

I winced. "Only one. What a relief."

"It's a big one. The program is in Ms. Entwater's office upstairs. Everyone who was in the embassy at the time of Ms. Entwater's death is now here in this room, Lazarians and humans alike. We may not leave this room, not any of us."

"Why not?" I said, looking at Thinta-ah.

"Bee-cauzzzzeh," the Lazarian replied, still using the command voice.

"Oh," I said, hoping I didn't sound sarcastic, and looked at Farber. "Any ideas?"

He took a long time swallowing. "We could call a courier to fetch the program for us. Of course, the courier will have to stay here with us afterward."

"We'll charge the overtime to the embassy," I said, reaching for my cellular again.

The courier business took a little longer, since the courier made the mistake of first entering the room we were all in, forcing me to have to call out for another. Forewarned, the second courier put the program chips in an envelope and tossed it to me through the open doorway.

"Go to it," I said, handing the envelope to Stilton. His face had a slightly greenish cast to it.

"Before I fool with the 'viewer and quite possibly break it, maybe we should talk to the humans," he said.

"Our species *firrrrrst*," said Thinta-ah, and it was another command. I wanted to object. Across the room the half dozen human employees were also still huddled together, albeit less closely. Except for the Pilot, who had gotten tired of sitting and was now leaning against the wall behind the others, smoking a cigarette in a long holder. She looked happy, but all Pilots look happy all the time. It's something that happens to them as a result of their training. Maybe after that first trip, they never really "came back," so to speak.

"Do as you're told," Farber said to Stilton, managing to sound



apologetic. "I've got a wife, a husband, and three children I'd like to see again before I'm much older, and I imagine you both have families as well."

I cleared my throat. In Stilton's case, that had been the wrong appeal to make; his significant others had voted him out three weeks before, and he was still stinging from it.

But instead of giving Farber the evil eye, he went to work on the 'viewer, even allowing me to steady it for him while he changed chips.

It took Stilton about half an hour to get everything synchronized and in phase and whatever else — I'm no more of a techie than I am a diplomat, though I suspected the last fifteen minutes he spent on running tests and diagnostics was nothing but pure stalling.

"I guess it's ready," he said at last. "But even with all these adjustments and conversions for Lazarian biology, I don't know how well it's going to work with an exoskeleton."

"No ex-oh," said Thinta-ah, coming over to stand too close again. "True faaaa-aice."

The Lazarians gathered around Entwater made no perceptible physical movements, but something in the air changed. Everybody felt it, even the humans on the other side of the room. It was similar to the sudden presence of ozone before a lightning strike (don't ask me how I know about that unless you're ready for a story longer than this one), and for a moment, I thought I could actually feel my hair stand on end.

"I know your custom of not showing the true face," I said to Thinta-ah. "How —"

Thinta-ah made Stilton cringe by touching the 'viewer again. "Not a-ahlive."

"You'll allow a recording that we can look at?" Stilton said, amazed.

"A-ahllow to look a-ah recording *one time*," the Lazarian said, making a strange movement something like a full-body shrug. The clothing, as loose, mismatched, and wrinkled as anything that ever came out of a Goodwill free bin, seemed to readjust itself on the Lazarian's loose-jointed body, somehow acquiring even more wrinkles. Wrinkles especially seemed to be their fashion statement. The Lazarians around the corpse still didn't move, but I knew they were unhappy. Not just unhappy, but unhappier than they had ever been in their lives. I tried to imagine an equivalent for myself — being forced to strip naked in public seemed obvious, but I knew this was a lot more than a nudity taboo.

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# I'd never heard the sound before, but I knew instinctively that the alien was weeping.

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My gaze fell on the 'viewer. Maybe more like being exposed with one of these things? "One time," I said to Stilton. "We'd better make it a good look, then."

Thinta-ah did some fast organizing. The humans were to sit directly behind the group in the center of the room so they couldn't possibly see their true faces while they were speaking to the 'viewer. Very simple solution — just the sort of thing that signals some major complication is imminent.

Stilton and I found a chair for the 'viewer. He got it aimed at the first Lazarian, fiddled with the focus for a few seconds, and then turned it on. "Anytime," he told the Lazarian, and turned away, crowding close to me as Thinta-ah crowded close to him.

In the long pause that followed, I could hear the Lazarian removing the exoskeleton. It was a ghastly sound, like cloth ripping, and I wondered if it hurt. Anything that made a noise like that seemed like it *had* to hurt.

"You a-ahsk," said Thinta-ah.

I cleared my throat. "What is your name?"

"Simeer-ah," said the Lazarian. I felt Thinta-ah stiffen. The last syllable indicated this was some relative of Thinta-ah's, but not which kind.

"How are you connected to —"

"A-ahsk only about Entwa-ahter!" Thinta-ah practically shouted.

I hesitated, wanting to explain about establishing a pattern, and knowing at the same time that Thinta-ah wasn't buying. A Lazarian's true face was exposed in the presence, if not the sight, of others, and to them, this was much more urgent than a murder. Any murder.

I could have sworn I heard Farber swallow from across the room. "Do as you're told," he called from where he stood facing the now-closed door with the courier.

Behind me the exposed Lazarian made a small noise. I'd never heard the sound before, but I knew instinctively that the alien was weeping. A wave of compassion mixed with shame swept through me — not the best thing for a cop to feel during a murder investigation. If I'd felt sorry for everyone who ever cried during questioning, there'd have been a few more hardheads

running free who had gotten away with murder and worse.

I took a deep breath. "What do you know about the death of Celie Entwater?"

"I a-ahm responsible."

My shamed compassion turned to cold water. "Are you saying you killed her?"

"It is my fault."

"Are you saying you killed her?" I asked again.

Stilton shrugged. "First time's a charm, I guess," he whispered.

"You strangled Celie Entwater?" I persisted.

"I ha-ahve the blaaaaaa-aimmeh."

"Stop now," said Thinta-ah softly. "Next."

I gave up. "All right. We'll wait while you cover yourself."

Damnedest thing — the exoskeleton made the same ripping-cloth sound going back on as it had coming off. My nerves felt sandpapered. And I had to hear that noise only nineteen more times.

No, sixteen more times, I discovered after it was safe to turn around again. Stilton aimed the 'viewer at the next Lazarian. The first one looked no worse for the experience — outwardly, anyway. There was nothing like sweat or blood: the exoskeleton appeared unchanged. But the Lazarian's body looked a little more relaxed, the kind of posture you see in people who finally confess to a crime and find they're more relieved at being able to get it off their chests than they are frightened of being punished. Maybe the first time really had been a charm.

Then the second Lazarian said exactly the same thing, and the world rearranged itself into the form it always took during a criminal investigation. The world is full of liars; liars who say they're sorry, and liars who say they're not; liars who swear they've never done it before, and liars who promise they'll never do it again. Apparently, some things were universal — literally.

By the time the sixth one confessed, Stilton had taken over the questioning, and my cynicism felt like a drug reaching toxic levels in my system. The only thing I actually listened to after number seven was that ripping-cloth sound. There was some kind of cosmic irony at work here, I thought; expose your true face and then tell a lie. Gave a deeper meaning to the term *barefaced liar* — that was for sure.

What I wasn't sure about was why it was affecting me so intensely.

Maybe because I secretly suffered from the ailment of poor species self-image, believing that aliens must be truly superior forms of life to flawed humanity, and they'd shattered my illusions of their being closer to the angels. What was that old joke that had made the rounds back when the Lazarians had first arrived? An optimist thinks humans could be the highest form of life in the universe; a pessimist knows they are. Right. Try this one, I thought bitterly: an optimist thinks all beings are siblings; a pessimist knows they are. And the name of the first sibling, in any language anywhere, was Cain.

"Still awake?" Stilton asked me suddenly.

I managed not to jump at the sound of his voice. "Yeah. Just."

"Good. Last confession coming up," he said, fiddling with the 'viewer on the chair. Without my noticing, the lights on the room had come up in response to the waning daylight. Through the frosted windows, I could see that it was nearly dark. With any luck, we might get out by dawn, I thought wearily. And when we did, I was going to ask for a transfer out of homicide and go chase burglars for a while, or drug addicts, or people who never paid their parking tickets.

"One more time," Stilton said, assuming the position.

The sound of ripping lcloth. If this one was going to lie about Entwatter, too, then I hoped it hurt.

But number seventeen was apparently a rebel in the group. "Fa-ahr-ber," the last Lazarian said. "Fa-ahr-ber is at fault."

"What a relief," I said. "I was afraid sixteen Lazarians had taken turns choking someone to death. But it turns out that the man dressed like a butler did it. Can't wait to alert the media."

Thinta-ah suddenly came back to life and told Farber to send out for pizza. Apparently, pizza was the closest thing we had to a Lazarian native dish. That didn't cheer me, or even give me an appetite, though I knew I should have been hungry.

And thirsty. The humans were — they all looked as if they'd spent the day in a desert, except for the Pilot, who seemed as completely detached and unaffected as ever. And yet, it was the Pilot who informed us that there were new problems developing with the humans.

She came over while we were setting up the 'viewer on a side table so we could go over the recordings. "We have people in very serious need," she said, pointing her cigarette holder at them.

"Of what?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew the answer, but the Pilot was already telling me.

"Of toilets. Some are in real pain," she added cheerfully. I wanted to hit her.

Instead, I talked to Farber. His response made me want to hit *him*. "Thinta-ah knows," he said. "Arrangements were made before you got here." He pointed at a large ornamental flowerpot in the corner. "It only looks like a flowerpot," he added, as if reading my mind. "It's a, ah, Lazarian waste receptacle. The Lazarians are, — ah" swallow — "casual about this kind of function."

"Oh, really?" I said. "I sure haven't seen any of *them* use it."

Swallow. "They need to only every other week. This isn't the week."

I went to the humans and broke it to them myself. One of them, a middle-aged man, shook his head stubbornly without looking up at me. But a woman of about sixty shrugged, marched over to the receptacle, and pointedly turned her back. The anger was almost palpable, and I knew what kind of stories they were all going to tell when they were finally allowed to leave. Lazarian-human diplomatic relations could well end up being harmed more by the bathroom arrangements than by a murder, I thought, going back to Stilton. Even terrorists would take their hostages to the bathroom.

Or, I thought, looking at Thinta-ah, who was being careful to look anywhere but toward the corner, had humans just come that much closer to understanding the experience of exposing the true face?

Understanding? I doubted it. They'd remember it, but it wasn't the sort of thing that would generate much empathy.

"One look," Thinta-ah reminded us when we were ready to look at the recordings.

"Only one," Stilton said. He had half a pizza next to him, and he was feeling better, much better than the delivery person who had come into the room before we could warn her. She sat sulking with the first courier. I wondered if anyone besides the employees' families, a courier service, and a pizza parlor had picked up on the fact that there was something funny happening at the Lazarian embassy. My cellular had been strangely silent — no one calling for an update or a statement or anything at all. Maybe we were sitting under a governmental bell jar — families, courier service, pizza parlor, and all.

"I'll need to freeze each image sometimes," Stilton told Thinta-ah. "Is that all right?"

The answer was so long in coming that I thought Thinta-ah had gone to sleep standing up again. "Yes. A-ahll right. One time through."

Stilton sighed with relief, turned on the 'viewer, and picked up a slice of double shitake mushroom. The screen lit up, and he dropped the pizza in his lap. If I'd had an appetite, I'd have had pizza in my own lap.

The face on the screen was Entwater's.

Stilton slammed down the *freeze* button. "What did you *do*?" I whispered angrily. "Did you get the focus upside down and put it on *her*?"

"You can see I didn't, he said, too spooked to be offended. "That's not the image of a dead person. That face is animated; it's moving, talking. Look at the readings." He pointed at the box on the left side of the screen. "They say living, not dead."

I looked from the screen to Thinta-ah on the other side of the table. "Could this possibly be this Lazarian's true face?"

"I maaaaa-aiy not look," Thinta-ah said. "But wha-aht faaaa-aice you see must be the true one."

I got up and went around the table to the alien. "Listen," I whispered. "The face on that screen is —"

"Do *not* tell me," said Thinta-ah. "I maaaaaaaaay not know. Wha-aht faaaaaa-aice is there is true."

I tried to think. It was hard with the heavy garlic smell drifting over from the platter next to Stilton. "O.K. The face on that screen cannot possibly belong to one of your species, but to another one entirely, and to a certain being —"

"*I maaaaaay not know!*" Thinta-ah's voice echoed in the room, not the command voice this time, but a cry of anguish. Everything stopped. Over by the Rockwellesque mural of the first meeting between human and Lazarian, Farber straightened up from a whispered conversation with the courier and pizza delivery person to glare at me.

"I'm sorry," I said to Thinta-ah, and bowed. "I was . . . I was ignorant."

The Lazarian refused to look at me. I went back around the other side of the table and sat down next to Stilton, feeling as if I had just defiled somebody else's church with a rite from my own. And I didn't even go to church.

The association caught in my mind like a burr. *Was this religious?*

Discounting hobby killers and for-hires, people tend to take a life over matters having to do with love/sex and personal offenses, real or imagined. Our people . . . but the Lazarians?

I beckoned impatiently to Farber, who hurried over. "Can I ask Thintah about Lazarian psychology?"

Swallow (of course). "No."

I groaned. "Why not?"

"You're not a psychologist. Besides, they don't actually have any."

"What are you talking about? They must. *Everybody* has psychology. *Animals* have psychology."

"Well, yes, they *have* it" — swallow — "but they don't have it as a science or a discipline or whatever you want to call it. The study of psychology is unknown on their world."

"But they must have *something*."

Farber nodded. "They do. They have true faces."

"That's a big mother's help," I said. "You want to know what true face that Lazarian on the end over there has?"

He started to protest that he wasn't allowed to look, and I waved his words away.

"Never mind. You wouldn't believe it if you did see it." He started to walk away, and I caught his arm. "Hey, stay close, will you? I'm working without a net here."

"We all are," he murmured.

"The verdict is in," Stilton said, sitting back. "According to the 'viewer, this alien is telling the truth."

I stared at Entwater's image on the screen, still frozen. She had been a very attractive woman; at least one of her parents had had relatives from Japan, and whatever else was mixed with it had blessed her with the kind of features that age well. Damned shame they wouldn't have a chance to age any further — or would they? Did true faces age? Supposedly, no one knew. *Supposedly*. But someone must have. There had to be some Lazarian keeper of forbidden knowledge . . . didn't there?

I gave up that line of thought as futile. If there were any such Lazarians, they were most likely back on Lazarus, or La-ah-ZA-AHR-eesh, or whatever the hell it was.

"What do you want to do?" Stilton asked me. "You want me to let this picture go and see the next?"

"Are you done looking at it?"

"Are you?" He ran a hand through his black curls. "Remember, we're never going to see it again, so make sure you've seen your fill."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said as he unfroze the image. The corresponding readings in the box were holding, waiting for the video to catch up.

"What do you mean?" Stilton said.

I pointed at the 'viewer. "That's what I mean."

I could actually see Stilton break into a sweat as Entwater's face reappeared.

"Why are you surprised?" I said. "They all *said* the same thing." I looked at Farber. "All except one."

Farber gazed back at me, swallowing without comprehension. Apparently, the last Lazarian's voice hadn't carried over to him. Or he hadn't been paying attention.

This time we ran the video concurrent with the lie-detector program; I watched the face while Stilton kept track of the readings. I wanted to imprint that face on my mind. It wasn't *quite* identical to the other one, but the differences were minor — the width of the face, the length of the nose, the size of the chin. That figured — each Lazarian's head would be a different size, so the face on it would be sized to fit. The Procrustean face. No, the true face on the Procrustean head.

Stilton sighed unhappily. "This one's telling the truth, too. Or so it says here. The program must be defective, though how we'd ever be able to tell —" He sighed again.

"Keep going," I said. "Maybe we'll see a variation somewhere."

Stilton gave me a dirty look. "Yah."

"We've already seen some." I leaned close and whispered. "That face isn't completely identical to the first one. There *are* variations, almost too minor to see, but they *are* there. What about the readings?"

He called back the first set for comparison. "You're right. But the variations are all physiological. They have two pulses, and they have respiration and skin temperatures, and they show the same degrees of variation from one Lazarian to another that we show one human to another. In all standard healthy people, anyway."

"So let's see if maybe someone *isn't* standard healthy."

Now he almost smiled. "I like you better than I used to, all of a sudden,"



he said, and focused his 'attention on the 'viewer again.

But of course, I had just been overly optimistic. Entwater's face appeared, confessed, disappeared, and reappeared over and over without any telling variations. That was probably telling — except, we couldn't understand *what* it was telling.

At least the seventeenth Lazarian looked like Farber. I took great consolation in the fact that my certainty had been correct. It didn't make up for the fact that the 'viewer said that that Lazarian was also telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth — but you can't have everything.

"The program's got to be defective," Stilton said, replacing Farber's facsimile with the seventeen readings. "We might as well switch programs, record all the humans, and then get comfortable in our new home. We're going to be here quite a while, and we might as well get over our potty shyness as soon as possible."

"No," I said, standing up and looking at Thinta-ah. Farber took a step toward me, and Stilton rose to his feet in response, moving to protect my left.

"I understand your feelings about the toilet," he said, "but don't go losing your head over it now."

"I mean, no, the program's not defective — not, no, I won't use the toilet. "I went over and stood as close as possible to the Lazarian, who didn't move away. "The program's *incomplete*. We don't have a control."

"A what?" said Farber suspiciously.

"A control," I said, staring up at Thinta-ah. "A standard to measure the other Lazarians against."

Stilton practically jumped over the table.

"Same arrangements as for the other Lazarians," I said. "Thinta-ah, it's your turn in the barrel."

"It's already been Thinta-ah's turn," said Stilton, sounding scared.

The Lazarian lunged past me for the table, but Stilton already had the 'viewer in his arms. "Back off," he said, moving away, "or I'll turn this around and show everyone in the room what's on the screen."

Stretched out across the table, Thinta-ah hesitated and then straightened up slowly. "You maaaaaaaay not see."

"I've seen," Stilton said. "You didn't say every Lazarian but you."

"No. I did not." Thinta-ah backed away from the table, but Stilton didn't

budge. Instead, he beckoned me over and pulled the 'viewer away from his chest.

Thinta-ah had apparently been either the consummate diplomat or completely undecided. His true face was a grotesque mixture of Entwater's and Farber's. What made it grotesque was not that it had a patchwork aspect, but that it was fluid — as if his features had been in the process of melting or flowing from one face to the other and had somehow froze in mid-change.

"I punched to create a control file, and the 'viewer informed me that one already existed," Stilton said as I studied the screen. "So I called it up, and: olé."

"Voilà" I corrected him.

In this case, I'd say it rates an olé. But I should have realized it would be here. It was how Entwater created the program, by using Thinta-ah as a control. He must have been teacher's pet. Diplomat's pet. Whatever."

"Freeze it, and let's hear the audio," I said. "Unfreeze it when the video and audio are in synch."

A voice that had to be Entwater's came out of the small speaker. "What is your name?"

"Thinta-ah."

"Are you from another planet?"

"Yesss."

The image on the screen came to life. There were a few more questions. Favorite Earth food? Pizza with heavy garlic in the sauce — true. Last eaten yesterday? No — a lie. It was all very disjointed, but light stuff, like a dating-service application, slightly adapted. But it had served the purpose — the readings were clear. Stilton let it run out, and then put all the readings on the screen together, the seventeen and Thinta-ah's.

"God *damn* it," he said, and blew out a disgusted breath. "Or maybe we should have known that, too — that if there was a control, then the program stands. They're all telling the truth, or they're the best liars in the universe."

"You're right."

We both jumped, and Stilton almost dropped the 'viewer. The Pilot had managed to come right up to us without either one of us knowing. "Right about what?" said Stilton.

She pointed a finger at him, smiling. "You seek the truth. And you" —

she swiveled toward me, finger still pointing — “seek the lie.”

“What do you seek?” I said, making sure that Thinta-ah wasn’t sneaking up on my side.

“Resonance, with all that is. Did you hear the one about the Pilot who went up to the hot-dog-o-mat and said, ‘Make me one with everything?’”

“That joke is so old, it’s got a long gray beard and a brand-new liver,” Stilton said, eyes narrowing. “It’s at least half a century since the first time someone told it, and it wasn’t a Pilot—”

“It is now.”

That wasn’t a happy expression, I realized — it was a *serene* one. It was the kind of expression you saw on people who were sure they had all the answers, minus the vacancy of the hard-core cult convert. What was Resonance, anyway? Something about traveling point to point and finding alignment so that two points that seemed to be separated by a great distance actually weren’t . . . or something. It didn’t make any sense to me, but a Pilot was one more thing I wasn’t. If I couldn’t figure out how it worked, I sure couldn’t figure out why it made her so peaceful.

“The Lazarians taught us Resonance,” she said, nodding at me. “And to travel point to point in space, we must travel point to point in here, too.” She pointed her finger at her own forehead now. “You don’t have the correct alignments in here, so you cannot travel point to point, but point to off-point. Dead end. Wander forty years in the desert, and not get out even then.”

She made us sit down again while she perched on the edge of the table, placing the ‘viewer next to her. “They are all telling the truth, and they are the best liars in the universe that you have ever met, because the truth they tell is *their* truth.”

It was one of the few times in my life that I could say I had experienced satori. And once I saw it, I felt like a total fool for not having seen it to begin with. Most humans couldn’t beat the ‘viewer, because no matter how much they believed in their own lies, they knew that what they believed was at variance with facts that other people knew, and so both couldn’t be true. But the Lazarians were aliens, so of course their concept of the truth would be alien as well.

Alien truth. True faces. The two concepts were whirling around each other in my head, trying to find a basis for connection.

“So what does that mean?” Stilton said. “Somehow they all killed her, or

they're all lying to protect someone?"

The Pilot shook her head. "You don't understand yet. They taught us Resonance with all things. Because *they* Resonate, *always*."

I couldn't tell if this was another satori or a continuation. "Entwater liked them. She liked her work." I glanced at Farber. "And she, in turn, was very popular. So popular that —" I broke off, resting one hand casually on the 'viewer. "Tell me: was she popular because she liked them, or did she like them because she was popular?"

"That has Resonated into one thing now. It can no longer be determined, because it is no longer distinguishable. All that remains is . . . love. Not the trendy brain chemicals," she added to Stiton. "Do you Resonate love?"

"You mean, understand it?" I laughed a little. "Does anyone?"

"What do you do? For love. What does it do to you?"

For once, I was at a loss, because I'd never had a long-term relationship or a child. Alone, you can travel faster in a career, but you leave a lot of understanding in the dust that way, too. "Oh, I guess you care about the other person," I said finally, feeling like a sappy greeting card.

"Yeah. And when they stop loving, they stop caring," Stilton said gloomily. "Not responsible, all that shit."

The Pilot's face lit up even more. I hadn't thought it was possible. "Responsible. *Responsible*. Are you always responsible?"

*I a-ahm responsible.*

*It is my fault.*

*I ha-ahve the blaaaaaa-aimmeh.*

Over and over again, sixteen times, from sixteen nearly identical true faces. I almost laughed out loud with the revelation. "They're guilty, all right," I said. "That is, they *feel* guilty, because they felt responsible for her, and they didn't prevent her murder!"

All the Lazarians gathered around Entwater's corpse turned their heads to look at me. Except one; the last one, of course.

"Pin a rose on you," said the Pilot, and patted my hand. "What next?"

"Trouble in Paradise," I said. "There's always trouble in Paradise — you can count on it, on any world. Because nobody can be that popular without someone getting jealous." I got up and walked toward Farber. "Someone got real, *real* jealous. *Killing* jealous."

"No," Farber said, enraged. "Jealous, yes — she had them all eating out

of the palm of her hand, practically — but I wouldn't — I *couldn't* —"

"And he didn't," said Stilton. "We haven't looked at the readings for his third recording, but I'd bet my life that they say he's as truthful as those from the other two recordings."

"I know that," I said, keeping my gaze on Farber. "He's not a good liar. Not *that* good, anyway. And he's not an alien. *And* he didn't have it quite right a minute ago — Entwater didn't have them *all* eating out of her hand, just *almost* all. You made a friend. One out of eighteen, not too popular, but a very, *very* devoted friend. A friend who loves you enough to be responsible for you. For your happiness. For your sadness. And for your anger and jealousy and hate."

Farber's mouth was hanging open. I turned toward Stilton. "Number seventeen's our murderer." I paused. "For a minute there, I was about to tell you to get out the cuffs, but then I remembered. Diplomatic immunity. We have to leave it up to Thinta-ah to administer any justice — poor Thinta-ah, the consummate diplomat of the Lazarian species, torn between both of them."

To my surprise, Thinta-ah didn't seem the least bit embarrassed. On a human the body language would have screamed *pride*. Aliens; go figure.

Stilton looked from the Lazarians in the group to the Pilot and then to me. "Are you sure?"

"Think about it," I said. "If they were all to blame for not preventing her death, who was really to blame for causing it? A Lazarian in love? Or the one the Lazarian was in love with?" I turned back to Farber.

"I didn't know," he said. "I had no idea." He frowned. "How did you?"

I opened my mouth, and then realized I couldn't tell him. "The truth was staring me in the face all along," I said after a long moment. "I just had to recognize it for what it was."

Farber spread his hands helplessly. "I don't understand."

"I know. But one tip before we all get out of here." I pulled him closer by his lapel. "Quit this job. You're not suited for this kind of diplomacy. Really. I know this."

"I'm not a diplomat; I'm a secretary. I can get another secretarial job anywhere. But this was . . . exotic, exciting. . . ."

"Give it up, Farber," I said, "or you're going to find that office politics have suddenly turned fatal on you."

That seemed to put the fear of God into him. I went back over to the

table, where Stilton and the Pilot were still sitting. "I'd say this means we're free to go."

"See for yourself," said the Pilot, and gestured at the center of the room. The group of Lazarians around Entwater had broken formation and were moving slowly away from the corpse, clustering in smaller groups of twos and threes. Space density. As if they had to breathe each other's air or something.

"Everyone maaaaaaaay leave," said Thinta-ah, bowing to us. "The door is now in service."

"And the truth shall set you free," Stilton muttered, committing everything in the 'viewer to long-term storage formats and then shutting it down.

"Not bad," I said. "In an awful kind of way."

"That's what the truth is supposed to do," he said stubbornly, pulling out the 'viewer strap so he could hang it on his shoulder. "That's what it's for. Right?" he added to the Pilot.

The Pilot folded her hands briefly. "What is truth?" She went back to the group of humans, who were all just starting to get warily up from their chairs.

I stared after her.

"What?" said Stilton.

"True faces. Celie Entwater died for human sins. Jestng Pilot."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Let's get out of here."



*In 1987 Pat Murphy won two Nebulas: one for her stunning novelette, "Rachel in Love" (now available as a stand-alone book from Pulphouse Short Story Paperbacks), and for her novel, The Falling Woman, published by Bantam. Since then, Bantam has published another critically acclaimed novel, The City, Not Long After. "Going Through Changes," our cover story, is the perfect tale for the late winter blues. Imagine a place without rain or slush. Imagine a vacation where you never have to leave home . . .*

# Going Through Changes

**By Pat Murphy**

**T**HE WIND tugged at Gretchen's raincoat as she stepped out of the restaurant. Halfway down the block, a sudden gust neatly flipped her umbrella inside out and drenched her with a blast of cold rain. She ran for the nearest shelter — a tattered awning over a door sandwiched between a pawnshop and a used-clothes store.

Her umbrella was a total loss, and the rain was coming down hard. She glanced at the door, hoping for a place to wait out the storm. Apparently, the door had once led to a dentist's office: the plate glass was decorated with a large, toothy painted smile. But the dentist's name had been scraped off, and a hand-lettered sign had been taped to the inside of the glass. Through the gilt streaks where traces of the old lettering remained, Gretchen read: DREAM VACATIONS — TRAVEL AGENTS OF THE IMAGINATION. Beneath that, in smaller printing: "Vacation in privacy

of your own mind. Take up to a week off in a single day. Ask about our special introductory offer."

Her feet ached — she'd been on them all day, waiting tables — and her ankles were a little swollen. Her shoes were soaked. She was hungry — on a diet again, always trying to lose a little weight. She couldn't afford a vacation. Since she'd come to the city, leaving the little Central Valley town where she'd grown up for the bright lights of San Francisco, she had barely managed to make the rent, let alone set any money aside. Still it was a place to get out of the rain.

Gretchen pushed the door open and climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor. The hallway smelled faintly of insecticide and pine air freshener; the carpet on the stairs had worn through to the threads. At the top of the stairs, she opened a door marked "Dream Vacations" and stepped into a waiting room that she suspected had been furnished by the dentist who had left: dark-blue carpet, metal-frame chairs with turquoise vinyl cushions, dog-eared magazines in plastic covers. On the wood-paneled wall, someone had thumbtacked a poster of a tropical beach. She almost turned around and left, but the rain was still coming down hard. At least the waiting room was warm.

A door marked "Private" opened, and a man in a white lab coat poked his head out. "Hello," he said in a tone of surprise. "A customer." He stepped into the waiting room with his hand outstretched. "I'm Dr. Geary, but you can call me Ernie." He was a rounded sort of man with a soft face and soft hands; no hard edges anywhere. Short, for a man — just Gretchen's height. His fine white-blond hair stuck out in all directions. The white lab coat he wore was too big for him, bagging at the shoulders and hanging untidily around his calves. He shook her hand eagerly and studied her face with a furtive air. "You are a customer, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she said, pulling her raincoat around herself to hide her waitress uniform. "I guess so. I saw your sign."

"Of course, of course," he said enthusiastically, still clinging to her hand. "Well, you've come to the right place. I'm sure you'll want to try our introductory offer. A week's vacation for a bargain price." He bobbed his head, and Gretchen noticed that his hair was thinning on top.

"A week's vacation to where?" she asked, trying to act like an interested customer.

"Wherever your mind takes you," he said. "Somewhere tropical, I



suggest." He waved a hand at the poster on the wall. "Warm waters, sandy beaches — all that stuff. Oh, it's lovely."

She blinked at him, puzzled. "Is that where you go?"

"Oh no, not me." He ducked his head shyly. "No, I go to a very private place. All my own. But you — you would find your own place, just as I found mine. If it's beaches you need, that's what you'll get."

"But you don't really go anywhere?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'really.' It's real enough. I guarantee it's as good as real."

She frowned at him. "How does it work?"

"Oh now, now." He clicked his tongue and shook his head quickly. "Secret process of my own invention. Don't worry about all that. You don't ask how your car engine works, do you? You just know it gets you from place to place. You don't ask where the electricity comes from when you turn on the lights. No need to bother with all the technical details." He took her hand in his and patted it in an awkward attempt to be reassuring. "You know, we use only a tiny portion of our brains, just a tiny bit of all that's there. There's so much potential, just waiting to be tapped. My process taps that potential, releasing the power of your own mind. And then you'll be amazed what you can do."

"All I want to do is get out of the rain." She hesitated. "But I really can't afford a vacation. I just came in because the wind wrecked my umbrella and I was getting all wet."

"I'll tell you what!" he cried, squeezing her hand and smiling at her. "I'll give you a special discount. Just thirty dollars for your first vacation. You need a vacation, and I know you'll love it. I just know it."

In her purse, she had just thirty dollars in tips. She'd already paid her rent for the month. "How long will it take?"

"An hour, that's all. But you'll feel like you were gone for a week. Subjective time, rather than objective time."

She bit her lip, studying him. "Are you really a doctor?"

His face fell, and he released her hand abruptly. "Of course I am," he said in a hurt tone. "Look right here." He gestured to a framed certificate on the wall, a diploma from Yale. He took a step back, squaring his shoulders so that they almost (but not quite) filled the lab coat.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling bad for him. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just thought . . ." She hesitated. "You're just not like any doctor

I've ever met."

"People expect doctors to be cold," he said sorrowfully. "I've never been a cold person." He shrugged and started to turn away.

She wet her lips, hesitating. The rain was still coming down; she could hear it rattling against the window. "What about the vacation?" she asked. "Can I still go?"

"You want to?" His grin returned. "You can go right now, if you want to. Oh, you won't regret this. You won't regret it at all."

She counted out thirty dollars in crumpled bills and change, and he led her into the back room.

"Sit down," he said. "Make yourself comfortable." He took her raincoat and hung it up, then gestured toward what looked very much like a dentist's chair. When she didn't move, he patted her on the shoulder. "Just relax. Sit here."

She let him lead her to the chair. Moving quickly, he fitted a helmet to her head. Wires from the helmet trailed back to a cart filled with electronic gear.

"Which arm?" Dr. Geary asked. "Right arm or left?"

"For what?" She started to sit up.

"The injection. Don't worry — it won't hurt a bit. O.K., we'll make that left," he said without waiting for an answer.

"I didn't know there was an injection. What does it do?"

"Just relaxes you. Nothing to worry about." He was swabbing her arm with a cotton swab. "Easy does it." Gretchen felt the prick of a needle. "There, now. That didn't hurt a bit. Here we go."

Gretchen tried to speak, but the drug was already taking effect. Her head felt very heavy. She lay back against the headrest and blinked at the ceiling. Dr. Geary's head swam into view, and he checked the wires that connected to her helmet. Gretchen tried unsuccessfully to focus on his face.

"Have a good trip," he said. Then his face disappeared, and the lights went out. Gretchen listened for the sound of retreating footsteps, but she could hear nothing. In the darkness, she blinked, waiting for something to happen.

THE SMELL hit her first: warm tropical air laced with the aromas of ripe fruit and flowers. She was lying on her side, and she felt something soft and damp beneath her cheek. She blinked, and her field of vision was filled with greenery. Her head was cushioned on a bed of moss, and she looked into a tangle of ferns and flowers.

High above her, birds called from the treetops. Moving slowly, she turned over onto her back. She could see the birds flit from branch to branch — scarlet and yellow, like flames among the greenery. Vines as thick around as her wrist embraced the trees, climbing toward the sunlight above them.

She sat up. The warm air caressed her skin as she moved. She was naked. She looked around. She was alone. There was nothing but trees and more trees. Pale green light filtered down through the canopy of leaves.

She got to her feet and wandered through the jungle with no destination in mind. The moss was soft beneath her bare feet. In the green light, she felt as though she were moving underwater, made languid by the heat and the humidity.

A flock of golden parrots burst from the lowest branches of one tree and then flew up into the canopy. A troop of monkeys chattered overhead. When they saw her, they howled — deep, wailing cries like organ music gone mad. Above them, high in the leaves, she could see spots of color dancing in the canopy of leaves. Birds, perhaps, or butterflies — she could not tell which.

For what seemed like the first time in a long time, she was happy. She climbed a tree, pulling herself upward on the dangling vines. The monkeys fled before her, swinging from branch to branch with whoops and great excitement. The tree they had abandoned was hung with ripe fruits that looked like smooth-skinned, pale-pink plums. She sampled one. It tasted like raspberries with a faint touch of chocolate. She ate three quickly, stopped to wonder about the calorie count, then laughed, realizing that she could eat all she wanted.

It was a wonderful vacation. She slept in the treetops, wedging herself between moss-covered branches so she would not fall. On the first day, she scratched a mark on a moss-covered boulder with a stick. But when she went back to scratch another, she could not find the first. The moss had grown back to fill it in without a trace. Having no way to record the

passage of days, she lost track of time.

One day she climbed higher in the canopy than she had ever been before. For the first time, she could see the blue sky overhead, the tropical sun glittering on the broad green leaves. The jungle stretched as far as she could see in all directions. In the distance, great towers of greenery rose from the trees. She squinted at them, wondering what they could be.

On a nearby tree, she saw butterflies the size of birds flitting among the bright-blue blossoms that were as big as dinner plates. She made her way through the branches to the tree that was in bloom. She had to climb high among branches that could barely support her weight, but she persisted, drawn by the perfume from the flowers. The insects were singing: a humming chorus that ebbed and flowed with the flutter of their wings. She clung to a branch and held out her hands to the butterflies. A particularly beautiful one — with wings patterned in turquoise blue and green — hovered beside her outstretched hand. She felt the wind of its wings, and she adjusted her grip on the branch so that she could lean closer.

She felt a searing pain in her hand. In an instant of clarity, she looked down and saw a small blue caterpillar — as blue as the butterfly — crawling back to its hiding place in a flower. The delicate hairs on its back rippled with the movement of its feet.

Her hand burned, and she could not maintain her grip on the branch. She tried to grab hold with her other hand, but she was suddenly dizzy, and she missed her grip. She was falling.

Then she woke up.

White walls. Dr. Geary's pale face. She blinked, trying to bring the world into focus. "Something bit me," she muttered as he took the helmet from her head. "Some kind of caterpillar."

"A caterpillar," he said. "How interesting. What did it look like?"

"Bright blue," she said. "I was watching the butterflies." She lifted her hand. A red spot marked the bite. "It hurts."

He nodded happily. "It's all in your mind, you know. There are no caterpillars here. Isn't it amazing what your mind can do? Did you have a nice time otherwise?"

She nodded, rubbing at the bite and staring at the office around her. She was disoriented, confused. "What time is it?"

"Just six o'clock, he said.

She frowned at her hand. It was already starting to swell. "It really hurts."

Dr. Geary took her hand and examined the bite. "You have a very powerful imagination," he told her.

"Maybe an aspirin would help," she said.

"If you think it will help, then it will," he said. He brought her an aspirin and a glass of water, then helped her out of the chair. "Now, you come back and visit again," he said.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The sky was gray. On the bus home, her hand grew red and puffy.

Gretchen lived in a tiny basement studio apartment attached to a house on the edge of San Francisco's Mission district. The apartment was small and dark, but it was the only place she could afford. The back window looked out on the house's backyard: a small patch of struggling lawn and a few tired palm trees.

By the time she got home, Gretchen could not bend her fingers. The skin of her hand felt too tight, too small to contain her flesh. Her knuckles disappeared in the redness. When she touched it, the skin felt hot, warming her fingertips, reminding her of the warmth of the jungle.

But strangely enough, she felt wonderful — rested and energetic. She wrapped some ice in a kitchen towel and pressed it to the bite for a while, but she felt restless. Finally she went out for a walk along Twenty-fourth Street. The sun had set, and the streetlights were on. It was raining gently, little more than a mist, but the air seemed warm. She wore her raincoat, but left it unbuttoned, flapping loose around her.

This area of the Mission had the feel of a foreign country — somewhere warm and tropical. The windows displayed Mexican blankets and Guatemalan embroideries, ceramic pots decorated with wild floral patterns, clothing in bright colors.

She paused beside a flower store on the street corner and admired the deep red of the roses and the brilliant yellow daisies. Beside the buckets of flowers were some potted plants: several different kinds of ferns and flowers. One clay pot held a branch that was thick with purple orchids. A scarlet macaw watched Gretchen from the cage in the store's front window.

The flower seller, a dark-haired woman, came to the door as Gretchen knelt to examine the orchids.

"I never noticed this store before," Gretchen said. "Did you open recently?"

"Recently, yes." The woman smiled. "The world is always changing."

Gretchen frowned. The woman's remark didn't seem to make much sense, but perhaps it was a Spanish idiom that did not translate well. "These orchids are beautiful. Do they take any special care?"

The woman's smile broadened. "You would have no trouble with them. For you, they will grow beautifully."

Gretchen carried the orchid plant home through the warm drizzle. Their scent — the aroma of soft greenery and rich perfume — reminded her of the jungle.

She slept soundly that night and dreamed of walking naked among the trees. She woke early. The swelling in her hand had gone down, and she felt well rested. She was very hungry, even after an enormous breakfast of fried eggs, toast, and orange juice. Near the corner where she waited for her bus to work, a produce store was just opening for the day. An old man and a teenage boy were chattering in Spanish as they arranged boxes of produce on wooden stands beside the sidewalk. Gretchen hesitated, listening to the soft babble of unknown words. Some of the fruits were unfamiliar — strange purplish bananas, knobby green lumps the size of her fist, smooth-skinned plums that reminded her of the ones that she had eaten in the jungle.

She asked the old man what the plums were called, and he muttered something in Spanish that she did not quite catch. She bought a bag of plums and ate one as she waited. It tasted just as sweet as she remembered.

For the next week, she was happy — happier than in all the months she had been in the city. Her appetite remained enormous. Each day at dinnertime, she lingered in the restaurant and helped herself to the all-you-can-eat salad bar, where she took helping after helping of greens and garnishes. At home, she munched constantly on carrot sticks and celery. At work, she snacked at every opportunity: snatching discarded parsley from plates as she busied them, stealing lettuce from the salads as she took them from the kitchen.

She gained weight, but that no longer bothered her. When she could no longer tug her pants over her hips, she went to one of the discount stores in the Mission and bought loose-fitting dresses with generous skirts that flared to accommodate her hips. She bought them in bright colors: a

swirling pattern of red and black, vibrant turquoise, and a wild floral pattern that reminded her of the jungle.

She bought more plants for her apartment. Like the orchid, they thrived. She left the heater on all day when she was at work. When she came home each night, she misted the plants, threw off her clothes, and reveled in the jungle heat. It seemed to her that the plants grew unnaturally fast: within a week the orchid plant had doubled in size and gained several blossoms. Outside her window the palm trees were growing, too. At night, their stiff fronds rattled against the glass as if they were eager to come inside.

The weather continued to be unseasonably warm, and the TV weatherman blamed tropical currents and climatic shifts.

"This weather's weird," Josie, one of the other waitresses, said. "Way too warm. My houseplants are growing like crazy."

"I like it," Gretchen said. "It's wonderful weather." She grinned out at the drizzle. "You know, I've decided I don't like the name Gretchen. I think I'm going to change my name."

"Yeah?" Josie studied her. "Well, now that you've started wearing those dresses, you don't look much like a Gretchen."

"I don't feel like a Gretchen." She considered the matter for a moment. "Maybe Gabriella. Call me Gabriella."

"Gabriella?" Josie shook her head. "I don't know if you look like a Gabriella."

"That's O.K. Call me Gabriella anyway."

Josie shrugged. "I don't know if I'll be able to get used to that."

"Sure you can," Gabriella said. She smiled, remembering what the flower seller had said. "The world is always changing."

"If you say so," Josie said, giving her a strange look.

Gabriella dreamed of the jungle. Once, when she chased a troop of monkeys through the trees, she could have sworn she saw Dr. Geary among them, whooping at her and grinning as he swung away through the branches.

The next day, she returned to Dream Vacations, her purse filled with tips. The sign was gone, and the door was locked. She peered through the glass, shading her eyes. She could see the staircase, the threadbare carpet — nothing more.

She stepped back, frowning. The young woman from the used-

clothing store stood in the doorway, watching Gabriella curiously. "What happened to that guy who was here?" Gabriella asked. "That Dream Vacations place."

"Gone," said the woman. She had four earrings in one ear and a diamond stud through her right nostril. "Disappeared." She studied Gabriella thoughtfully. "You're not the first one looking for him. Four guys in blue suits and a black car came by. Told me they were from the Food and Drug Administration. Maybe he skipped town."

Gabriella shook her head. "Why? I looked at his license — he really was a doctor."

The woman shrugged. "Complaints about some kind of illegal drug, maybe. You knew him?"

"Not really." Gabriella clutched her purse nervously. "Just met him once." She turned away before the woman could ask her any more questions.

That night, she dreamed of the jungle. For the first time, she headed toward the spires she had seen from the treetops, and found herself walking along a street in a ruined city. Moss had overrun the place, covering everything in a blanket of greenery. Beside the level path that she took to be the street, she scraped moss away from a section of curb, revealing red paint. A jungle creeper twined up a nearby No Parking sign; the trumpet-shaped flowers that hung from the vine obscured the red lettering. Parrots nested on the window ledges of the gray stone buildings. On one corner a tree that was as thick around as Gretchen's waist had broken through the street. Its roots had buckled the asphalt, and grasses had taken root in the newly formed cracks.

She woke early that morning and went for a walk before catching the bus to work. The day was already warm. In cracks in the sidewalk, new green shoots were sprouting, tender young plants reaching for the sun. She stopped and plucked a shoot to chew on. She liked the fresh green taste of the new growth. On one lamppost, she noticed moss growing, the bare beginnings of a carpet of green. She stopped and ran her hand gently along it, enjoying the way it tickled her skin.

At the end of her shift that day, the restaurant manager — a tall, thin man who seemed to be perpetually on the edge of exploding with nervous tension — told her he would like to see her in his office. She followed him back to the room behind the kitchen. She knew she ought to be worried:



the manager rarely had anything to say to any of the waitresses. But she felt calm, at ease with herself. She inspected him in a disinterested way, noticing a shaving cut on his cheek, a smudge on his tie, a bit of loose string that clung to the tweedy fabric of his jacket sleeve.

"I've had some complaints about you," he said.

"Um," she said noncommittally, keeping her eye on the string that might have come from a parcel. She couldn't really keep her mind on what he was saying: something about the salad bar, something about a warning, something about expecting his waitresses to live up to a certain image. It was all quite vague. After a time, he stopped talking.

"Do you have anything you'd like to say?" he asked.

"You have a thread on your sleeve," she said.

"What?"

"Right here," she said, boldly plucking the thread from his jacket. "There." She tucked it in the pocket of her apron.

He frowned at her. "Gretchen, have you been listening?"

"Oh yes," she lied.

"Will you think about what I've said?"

"Certainly," she said. Then, almost as an afterthought: "I don't think you'll have to worry about all this much longer." She turned away. "I'll be going now. See you tomorrow."

She decided to walk home through the rain. She had never bothered to replace her umbrella. The fine drizzle did not bother her. In fact, she rather liked the soft touch of the water on her face, the delicate tickling as it ran down her cheeks. As she walked, she admired the foliage that had taken root in every crack in the sidewalk or street. She passed a road crew that was scraping the vegetation away and filling the cracks. "It'll just grow back," she told the workers. They stared after her when she walked on.

As she walked, she kept watch for bits of string. Near a UPS office, she found a knotted mass of shaggy brown twine, which she stuffed in her purse. In the gutter beside a broken umbrella that flapped in the breeze like a wounded bird, she found a shoelace. She passed through Dolores Park — pausing only to snack on some tender shoots from a newly sprouting flower bed. In a shrub, she found a tangle of kite string.

When she got home, she slipped out of her dress and prowled through the apartment restlessly. The air in the room was thick with the perfume from the orchid. The light from the window was filtered through the

leaves of the ferns and palms.

In a drawer, she found a thick cable-knit sweater that she had bought at a flea market. A loose strand of yarn was dangling from the collar. She tugged on the yarn, and a few stitches unraveled. She pulled again. There was something satisfying about the feel of the wool in her hand: rough, slightly greasy, and smelling of lanolin. She wrapped the yarn about her hand. When she was done, she had a ball of yarn the size of her head. She added the string and twine she had collected, sitting in the window under the palm tree and patiently untangling the knots.

Over the next week, she collected loose threads, the string from packages, bits of twine. In the restaurant, she was aware that the manager kept watching her and frowning. She ignored him, having more important things on her mind. She walked home each day from work scavenging for string. She did not buy string. It was more satisfying to find it, piece by piece.

By the end of the week, she had a ball of string so big she could barely circle it with her arms. Looking at the ball of string made her feel strong and protected.

On Friday the manager fired her. He called her into his office, gave her a paycheck, and said that she needn't bother coming back on Monday.

"That's O.K.," she said. "Just as well. The world is changing." She glanced at his startled face. "Time for me to go. I have lots to do."

She walked home through the rain. On the TV news that night, the announcer kept showing the road crews that were trying to keep the streets clear of plants. They were using blowtorches and herbicides, but the plants just came back.

That night, she came down with a mild fever, just enough to keep her tossing and turning in bed. For once, she wasn't hungry. The thought of food made her feel ill. She felt confused and disoriented. When she slept, she dreamed of the jungle: the scarlet feathers of a macaw, the impossible green of the foliage, the heart-stopping blue of a flower.

She woke early in the morning. When she went to brush her teeth, her mouth felt peculiar, as if her teeth were too big or her lips had changed shape. As if the parts no longer fit together as they once had. She felt restless and ill at ease in the small apartment. She paced for a while, feeling itchy and uncomfortable in her own skin. Finally she opened the window. The blast of fresh air that blew in carried the smell of greenery.

She set the ball of string beside her bed and lay down. She started at her feet, moistening the string with saliva and wrapping the damp strands neatly and loosely around her ankles. The saliva bound the strands together, and she marveled at how natural this felt. Of course it felt natural; it was natural. She knew that.

She worked her way up her body, creating a woven shell that was just large enough to contain her. She took one last look at the apartment. Her rent was paid through the end of the month, and she did not think the change would take that long. By the time she was ready, the city would have finished changing, too.

She sealed the cocoon closed from the inside and relaxed in the warm darkness. She would fly away on the evening breeze, floating high over the jungle on her shimmering wings. She smiled in the darkness, waiting for the inevitable changes.

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— SATISFACTION GUARANTEED —

*Like the other stories preceding it in this issue, "Prison Dreams" explores perception and memory. Only Paul J. McAuley takes a completely different tack. Paul's first novel, Four Hundred Billion Stars, was a co-winner of the 1988 Philip K. Dick Memorial Award. Gollancz published his novel Eternal Light last year in the United Kingdom, and Avon's American edition should be appearing right about now. Paul works as a lecturer in Biology at St. Andrews University, and he also writes a regular column for Interzone.*

# PRISON DREAMS

**By Paul J. McAuley**



HE END OF A SHITSTORM  
of a shift, eleven hours down,  
one to go, Lianna caught the

squeal for a psychokiller scenario. So far, three months into her sentence, she'd avoided this, the worst kind of triage. But everything that goes around comes around. She'd been catching sleep while everyone else was cleaning up a big combat game — EuroNissan execs cooling out after a sales conference — and *slam*, she was on.

Wired with caffeine, needles digging her right eye, Lianna threw herself into the chopper moments before it rose from the pad. Hands grabbed her, pulled her into a jump seat. Kollner's cleanup crew, that was something, at least — all case-hardened zeks but for one new, scared-looking kid gulping back nervousness, grin too wide in his white face. Lianna knew how he felt.

The chopper ran low and fast parallel to the long beach. Naked sunbathers in dispersion patterns just beyond the edge of analysis, stands of

sun umbrellas, roofs of franchise huts. Did anyone on the beach look up from sunstruck dreaming and wonder where the helicopters went to, in the Oostduinpark? Did they care?

Lianna asked about the new kid. Over engine roar, Kollner told her Toorop had done the freaky and tried to make it into the dunes before his chip stopped him, had been rotated to prep and dispatch for the rest of his sentence. Kollner, a big, scary-looking man, even scarier if you knew what he'd once done. Slow and mild manner, passing out smokes, asking Lianna how her shift was running.

"Too long," Lianna yelled into his weary smile, and took a smoke and drew it alight. Cool smoke flooded her throat; the needlepoints of pain in her eye melted.

Kollner knew this was her first psycho. He gave a shark smile. "It's just like combat games," he said into her ear, "only . . . *intense*."

Lianna managed a tight smile, knowing Kollner had been through half a dozen runs. He was a trusty now, but he was under the chip for life. She swallowed a couple of glucose tablets with a sip of Diet Coke, and the chopper was beating down.

The patient squatted behind a canvas windbreak, shivering in the grip of his attendants. Big man, bodybuilder, camo pants tucked into high-top boots, flak jacket crossed with bandoliers, face hidden behind a black pinhole mask. He was hauled to his feet as Lianna went past. Blood and worse crusted around the crotch of his pants: a real psycho, not some politician or exec drained of testosterone rage. But like them, he'd not remember what he'd done in deep-fix trance: scenarios were for imprinting chip-feedback loops.

Afterward Lianna would realize how much she envied his amnesia.

The setup was in a long draw. Half a dozen hooches, woven walls splintered by heavy fire, two still smoking. Little figures sprawled on white sand, blue skins more vivid than their blood. The cleanup crew waited on Lianna's assessment, backs to wind that knifed in from the Noordzee as they drew on the last of their smokes.

Lianna walked the perimeter, blanking out the whines of those dolls still alive, avoiding their eyes. Her chip was nagging her, a heavy feeling in the orbit of her right eye, something like a silver needle running back into her head: this was so close to what she'd done to her husband.

Most dolls were wasted: a mercy. A bunch in an untidy heap, torn

apart. An arm lying off by itself, hand clenched. Two females naked and bloodied and very much dead, both facedown, legs wide sprawled. Oh Christ, the guy on some rape-o freak-out. But better them than any woman — her thought? Or chip propaganda?

Lianna made fifteen dead, a dozen badly wounded, three hardly more than scratched. One by the perimeter tape, sitting with his leg out in front of him, holding an oozing thigh wound, through and through. Had he been human, he would have gotten away clean, but dolls couldn't cross the tape to save their lives.

Her count way too low — most probably caught in the hooches. A quick sweep confirmed: the psycho had raked them with heavy-caliber gunfire, tossed in frag grenades, nothing left for her to fix unless the crew turned a survivor from under the pieces of the dead.

Lianna told Kollner to start with the hooches, opened her kit, and took the wounded by priority, swiping white X's on the foreheads of those too far gone. Work focused her thoughts — her hands were steady as she sorted through her kit. Chip pressure receded. Couple of times at the beginning, she'd blacked out: now she could distance herself from gore. She pushed back the length of gray-blue gut of one that had been eviscerated with a knife thrust, cauterized the wrist stump of another. A male with a sucking chest wound fixed a dull, betrayed look on her as she packed the bloody, bubbling cavity. Worse was the doll that had tried to shelter her "baby," a microcephalic homunculus she'd been programmed to care for. The mother's head blown off, a splintered spike of bone: the baby-thing under her corpse, its limbs wriggling as slowly as a battery-drained toy's. It was unharmed, but drenched in blood to which sand stuck like crystallizing sugar — Lianna set it aside for pickup.

The cleanup crew had almost finished. Shattered corpses and stray limbs were stacked like firewood. Kollner, certifying each corpse by scanning the tag implanted in its third sacral vertebra, looked like a grocery clerk moving bar-coded goods through the checkout. Two women were chasing the new boy: one brandished a severed hand.

The last two casualties were sitting up, patiently waiting Lianna's attention. They brushed her cheeks with soft blue-skinned fingers, made cooing sounds as she dressed their flesh wounds. Lianna groaned when she stood: dull pain punched her in the kidneys.

The women had caught the new kid, were trying to stuff the hand into

his open fly as he writhed and made a noise halfway between a laugh and a squeal. Lianna sat off to one side in hot sun while Kollner supervised pickup. The ones she'd marked were given two lines of topic, enough to stop their hearts.

Lianna thought: Kollner had been right; it hadn't been so bad (forget those splayed female corpses). Not as bad as she'd imagined, anyway.

When all the corpses had been stacked, the whole pile was doused with jellied petroleum, and Kollner threw on a flare. Lianne watched with something nagging at her; it took awhile to remember she'd missed the doll with the leg wound over by the perimeter. He couldn't have died. Dolls were too dumb to get shock, and the wound hadn't been bleeding that badly.

Lianna made herself get up and track the perimeter. She liked things neat; it had been one of her husband's final accusations. She found a crusty patch of scuffed sand where the doll had been sitting, saw drag marks and pulled the perimeter tape out of shape, an arrowhead pointing through a saddle in the dune ridge. Lianna would have followed, curious now despite the sodden weight of her exhaustion, but her chip wouldn't let her.

Kollner's computer did show there was a body missing; to further confuse things, it turned out someone had thrown the still-living baby-thing on the pyre. But as Kollner said, what was one pinhead, more or less? And he was just as dismissive about the missing doll, kidding Lianna that it was her first encounter with fairies.

He handed Lianna an ice-cold Coke; she held it to the back of her neck before chugging half straight down. She said, "Everyone talks about fairies, but no one believes in them."

"Just another hinky urban myth. You get wild dolls, strays, cast-offs, but they don't last long without people. That casualty — most likely its chip got fritzed, and it wandered off. Sometimes they try and bury themselves. Maintenance will find it." Kollner was sweating heavily in the double heat of sun and pyre. Two dark half-moons of sweat under the arms of his bloodstained white jacket. He said, "You did all right, but you shouldn't knock yourself out fixing wounded. Flesh wounds, that's O.K.; they recycle straight off. Anything else: two lines, the old grand slam. What I mean is, they're just walking meat, *made* things. Think of them that way, you won't ever chip out. Let your chip decide about

people; that's why they put it in you."

"It won't take much to get those others fixed." Thinking: Things didn't look at you as they groaned bloody foam from chest wounds; they didn't try and shelter what they were meant to care for. Thinking of telly shows about outlaw bands of dolls and humans living wild in the fringe wildernesses; had to be some truth to them. Half of her wishing the doll had escaped, despite Kollner's dismissal.

"Days I wake up and think I'm never getting here," Kollner said. "But, hey, I always do. Maintain, that's what my motto is. Just maintain. What you got, a deuce for manslaughter?"

"Mmm." Most of the zeks talked obsessively about their sentences; Lianna was still uncomfortable, aware that if she didn't watch herself, she'd be like the others soon enough — complaining she'd been set up, or exaggerating misdemeanors into major felonies. Except, what she'd done *had* been a major felony.

"You have to run this?"

"No. No, only simulations."

"Easy street," Kollner said. "You're lucky to see it just from this side. Just maintain; you'll sleepwalk it. Leave wild dolls to the park wardens."

Maybe Kollner was right. Lianna was too tired to chase the matter when the chopper got her back. Her shift had finished an hour ago; she grabbed the stuff she'd stolen to order, strap-hung the tram in a haze to her crib, managed to just about reach her bed and fall into it fully clothed, and because the next day was Sunday, slept eighteen hours straight.

**A**ND WOKE naked under a cool, clean sheet, her husband curled into her back. She rolled onto her tummy and let his clever hands find tension points and unknot them, still half-asleep when she rolled onto him and began to move, a long, grinding, slow dance — until something shook her awake.

Shit, another chip dream. Trying to fix sanitized, pleasurable memories of her dead husband, trying to erase the real memories of his death.

What had woken her, hammering on the door, started up again. Nicole, wanting the stuff, wanting to know why it hadn't been dropped off last night.

"I was tired," Lianna said, and started to explain about the psychokiller scenario.



Nicole brushed it aside. Small, olive-skinned, white hair cropped close, barefoot in red jeans and a black leather vest, she clutched the little package, scowled. "Darlajane's pissed; she might not make quota." Then she was gone.

The crib had once been a hotel, down in the funky old half-abandoned seaside resort at the edge of the vast dune system beyond Den Hague's barrier. Run by a feisty old ex-punk, given over to zeks on workfare, already it felt like home to Lianna; amazing how quickly she'd adapted. But after her marriage, she'd never lived anyplace she could call her own; perhaps it wasn't so strange.

Late afternoon, most of her free day gone. She sat in a beach chair on her room's balcony, picking through a plate of fruit slivers, happy in the sun to watch the straights at play. She'd learned to surrender to moments like this, to dissolve in the sweet eternal moment of doing nothing. Electric trolleys drifting through the intersection, bells tingling. The dull, thumping beat of the permanent floating wave two blocks over underscored the noise of the crowds moving along the wooden boardwalks. Tanned, brightly clothed animals surging to and fro, handsome, affluent, secure and . . . *smug*, yes, *smug*, in their postmillennial utopia, geezers and babushkas enjoying their right to unlimited leisure and the universal unearned wage. Many wore gold-lensed videoshades, trancing their way through overlay visions of coral reefs or tropical rain forests or Mars: the Valles Marineris was that month's number one.

Paradise not enough, Lianna thought, sitting on her balcony high above them. Even in paradise, there was always something better to reach for. One thing about being a zek, it gave her a perspective; it distanced her from what had been her life. Zeks were the poor, the dispossessed, the Third World in the rich, dreamy First.

The psychokiller scenario kept coming back to her at odd angles, unexpected moments. The disappeared doll, fairy tracks. Lianna noticed just how many dolls there were, moving through the crowds on errands, running concession stands, driving trams. As numerous as the people they served; people who walked past them as if they weren't there, invisible as lampposts, junction boxes. Way she'd treated them when she'd been running her husband's household — she hadn't even known how many house dolls there'd been. The things down in the basement, shivers just to think of them: used, every which way.

At last she got dressed, went to hang out in the downstairs lounge (some of the women leaning out of a window, yelling at passersby — "Hey, lunchmeat! Pork chop! You looking to cop a freebie, we're hot and we're hungry!") and ended up touring the shopping arcades with Nicole, who'd got her hit for the day and mellowed out.

"Do you really need that stuff?" Lianna asked, half-amused, half-annoyed at the way Nicole slurred and giggled away her sentences.

"Need somet'ing. It slides under the chip, an' supply's in basemen'." Rubbing cropped white hair, skipping up and down, laughing and saying she was going to shave her whole head like Darlajane — watch if she didn't.

Nicole, half-French, half-Senegalese, half Lianna's age, had worked as a prostitute since her father sold her at the age of eleven in the Marseilles meat market. She'd been injected with hormones to bring on her puberty, worked houses that catered to men who wanted and could pay for human prostitutes, was now a habitual offender with habits too deeply ingrained for chip therapy to touch, or so she said. Nicole took a childish delight in prowling the boutiques. Her chip wouldn't let her go in — she was serving a dozen concurrent shoplifting offenses — but she could press up to lighted windows, comment professionally on displays. She subscribed to every fashion magazine, downloading from Darlajane's net: that and the stuff were her reward for running errands for Darlajane's scam.

She and Lianna strolled the long seafront, ate burgers and fries at one of the beach cafés. It would have used up half Lianna's zek wage, but her deliveries took care of luxuries. Nicole devoured everything, right down to the last drop of the mayonnaise with which the Dutch drenched their fast food. Lianna watched with sisterly fondness, talked about what had happened at the psychokiller scenario, Nicole making appropriate squeals of disgust while wolfing down her food.

Afterward, at Nicole's insistence, they went through the sex arcades, Nicole commenting on people commenting on the sex toys grinding lasciviously in relaxshop window displays, Lianna laughing for the first time in three days. The male sex dolls were only marginally modified, but some of the females were like something from another species, genitals swollen and complicated like predatory flowers. Lianna couldn't believe men could like anything so gross. They passed a bunch of S-M places, and Nicole said at least human pros didn't have to put up with that anymore;

she used to do only rich, straight johns. The remark touched something in Lianna. She told Nicole about the lordotic response; the young girl shrugged and said they were only dolls; she shouldn't waste tears over *things*.

Lianna said, suddenly angry, "It matters that it happens. That there are men who can do things like that. It matters that we make living things and let them be torn apart." Images flashed in her head: the splayed female dolls, the wriggling baby-thing, butchered meat piled in a hooch. Her right eye pulsed with warning pain.

"That's wha' dolls are for," Nicole said. "Take all the bad stuff; isn't as if they really feel pain. All of my clien's were nice to me. Well, mos'ly." Nicole giggled. "What I want is jus' one or two johns, nice old men who can't get it up an awful lot and feel guilty and give me presents."

But Lianna didn't hear her, seeing her husband's red sweaty face looming over hers as he pummeled her sides on his way to climax. Seeing herself blue with bruises, skinny and small as a doll — helpless now in feedback spiral, flashing on the aftermath of the psycho's little spree, every dead doll with her husband's face. Then her chip took her.

Lianna had been married five years, her husband a ranking diplomat in the Peace Police, the peepers. Five years she'd been part of his team — the diplomat's wife, confidante, social secretary, servant and social partner and whore, the real old-fashioned hausfrau. He'd spent a lot of time in Africa and China; his cosmopolitan charm was what had first attracted Lianna. Soon she realized that there was a darker side; it began with rough sex play, had led to beatings, sometimes so systematic that they left half her body tender with bruises. When she miscarried after one of the beatings, she stabbed her husband to death while he slept.

Circumstances made it manslaughter, but she was chipped anyway — unavoidable, her counsel said. So was forfeiting her husband's estate; it went to his family back in Czechoslovakia. Lianna had been a meditek before she married, five years behind current technology; but for doll triage, that didn't matter. Chipped and processed, she'd started working in Rotterdam arenas, had fallen into Darlajane's drug-manufacturing thing almost without thinking, the way she'd fallen into marriage. A classic victim: being chipped hadn't changed that.

Waking up, Lianna felt as rough as she'd ever felt after a bad time with her husband. Terrific headache, her whole skin sore. She was lying on a

saggy couch in warm, flickering darkness that smelled of mold and candle wax and dried cat feces. Vinyl LP records and plastic-cased CDs and actual paper comic books were stacked in tottering piles around walls shingled with glossy, tattered posters. Candles stuck in wine bottles burned on shelves; gutted flatscreen tellies showing weird drifts of snow, or the interlocking spirals of self-engulfing patterns. On a low wicker table, a page-size computer screen was scrolling spidery black lines of text. Lianna knew at once where she was: the basement apartment of Darlajane B.

Nicole was sitting cross-legged by a heap of disemboweled electronic equipment, leafing through a comic book. When she saw that Lianna was awake, she came over and helped her sit up, while Darlajane shuffled into the room with a laden tray. Herbal tea: its strong, bitter taste burned through Lianna's chip hangover.

The old woman watched with a proprietorial air as Lianna sipped. Limber as a twenty-year-old, she sat zazen. Black jeans, black leather jacket, black T-shirt with a black slogan, orange construction boots. Apart from a scalp lock, her head was shaven; tattoos swarmed her papery scalp. When she smiled, which she did a lot, her steel teeth glinted wetly. Darlajane B. claimed to have been born the day the Beatles put out their first single. By Lianna's reckoning, it made her eighty, but she could have been sixty or a hundred, wise, witchy old woman. She was used to these crises; better to deal with them here than have them reported, she said, and have to thrash it out with a counselor.

Nicole said to Lianna, "You shouldn't get angry, then your chip wouldn't do you."

"I wasn't angry at you."

"I know that. You were angry because of work, but it's no use being angry for dolls. They're only *things*. That's why I showed you that stuff, so you'd see."

Darlajane B. said, "You want to help, Nicole? Go somewhere else; let Lianna alone. You can handle your chip, but she's new to it."

"That's what I was trying to tell her, but honestly, D.J., it was like talking to my counselor."

"Time you listened to someone. And time you did less stuff, maybe, if this is what it makes you do."

"Ey, I can handle it! It's just—"

"I said later! Go on now, girl. Me and Lianna need to talk." After Nicole

had left, Darlajane B. added, "Silly little whore, she ever had an intelligent thought, it would have died of loneliness. What do you want?" A cat had materialized from the shadows, one of the colony Darlajane B. said she'd founded ten years ago with three rjigged queens and a tom, using pirated and rewritten doll chips. It put its front paws on the old woman's knees, said something in a yowling dialect. Darlajane told it to stop complaining; it hissed at her and sped off.

"I picked up a kit microsauro some kid turned loose, and they don't like it wandering around," Darlajane explained. "There's a kink in its pyruvate cycle I'm going to edit before I clone: that way you a pet can own and not have to buy expensive food additives. It keeps my hand in."

The thing about Darlajane B. was that you couldn't ask her a direct question; you had to wait until her conversation came around to the right place. So Lianna had to listen to gossip about the other zeks until the old woman got around to asking Lianna how her sentence was going, and Lianna used the opening to tell the story about the missing doll.

"I heard there are supposed to be dolls living free, in the dunes. That's why I wondered about the one that vanished—"

"All kinds of things in the dunes," Darlajane said. "Nothing for you to worry your head about, girl. Lived there one time myself. I used to be an idealist, a revolutionary — yeah, you know that. And it's true: we used to boost dolls, modify them, turn them loose. Old counterculture tricks, though God knows what happened to the dolls, and no one does it anymore. The revolution was over before you were born, girl, and we lost. Turned to crime, a lot of us. I was a millionaire for like about eight days, till the peepers caught up with my credit line. That's when I became Darlajane B. You still hurting, girl? Got something that can help." She climbed to her feet, which took a good minute, and ambled into her kitchen.

Something cat-sized wandered out of the shadows under the tellyscreen. It was a furry purple stegosaur, the plates along its back alternate black and yellow. Lianna stepped around it, sat at the computer screen, and called up the menu, asked for bulletin boards dealing with doll civil rights. The screen strung half a dozen names and access numbers, and Darlajane B. said, "You won't find anything useful on public access. Peepers sift those boards for information just like everyone else. Hell, I bet they even run most of them, sweeping up would-be dissidents. The

real stuff is underground, clandestine."

"Can you tell me about the real stuff?"

"I could, but you'd only get into trouble. Possession of a samizdat newsheet will lose you your remission. Forget about dolls, girl. The revolution is over, and the straights won. The millennium has come, and we are in paradise, with slaves to wait on us hand and feet and pour out a never-ending cornucopia. Here, this will be more use than forbidden knowledge."

The old woman dropped a little glassine envelope into Lianna's lap. It held a scattering of black pills so small that Lianna could fit half a dozen under her thumbnail. She said, "I touch drugs, my chip squeals. You know that, Darlajane. And I couldn't touch anything—"

Steel flash. "It's not from the basement — think that on you I'd waste? Designed the plant that grows them myself. You need a kick anytime, a little speed to get through the day, use them. And don't worry about your chip; this is *natural* stuff."

Lianna thanked her, knowing she'd never risk dropping anything from one of Darlajane B.'s splices. God knew what the side effects could be, anything from flashbacks to pseudo-Parkinson's.

"Trust me," the old woman said. "And you still feel bad about dolls, come talk to me again. You've done good business for me so far; I'd hate to see it end because you became unreliable. And neither would my . . . associates."

Lianna thought of the two men, low-level peepers, who came by every week for the latest consignment, and she had another flash, almost transcendental, that it wasn't an act; Darlajane B. really was scared of them. It seemed that things were tough all over.

CONVENTION TIME in Den Hague, round-the-clock combat games in the arenas in the dune-swallowed industrial area down by the old silted harbors of Rotterdam. Customers wore flexible body armor, helmets and visors, were armed with little .08 plastic pistols that fired iron-tipped Teflon fléchettes: clean kills or through-and-throughs. Dolls were armed, too: lasers that slowed the fire rate or entirely shut down the customers' pistols, depending where the picowatt beam hit their armor. Good clean fun for jaded technocrats, no harm involved. It was even said the combat dolls enjoyed it, if they knew

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## Lianna moved through the detritus of licensed violence, administering mercy.

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enough to enjoy anything. Lianna didn't see how. Dead was dead; it didn't matter who killed you.

Lianna worked fourteen hours on, ten off, tracing tags of downed dolls, sorting them into meat and survivors. Moving in after the johns had left, following traces in spacey industrial-cathedral volumes. Receding perspectives of light and shadow amongst rusty, splayed roof supports; floors of saddled sand littered everywhere with spent propellant cartridges. Dolls fallen in the casual attitudes of death, or quietly waiting for her. In other EC states, the johns were allowed to take out wounded with head shots, catharsis in their very own spatter movie, but the Netherlands had game laws modified from slaughterhouse licensing: only qualified personnel could administer the coup de grace. Which Lianna did dozens of times each shift, shooting in two lines and letting the meat go into classic clonic seizure.

She'd been doing triage for three months, but now it was as if she were starting all over again. Noticing things, the way wounded dolls moved, their small sounds, their fluttering hands, as she worked on them. The patterns of disturbed sand she sometimes found around them were like the patterns she used to make in the snow when she was a child, lying down and moving her arms to make angel wings. . . .

Get through this, she thought; try not to see the dolls as human. Not too difficult — they all had the same prognathous, beetle-browed face, the same smooth blue skin. She might have been treating the same unlucky doll over and over, fixing it up to go back into line and get shot all over again. Get through this, take the stash she'd earned from hijacking doll pharmaceuticals for Darlajane B., run run run.

Trying to believe nothing was wrong, Lianna moved through the detritus of licensed violence, administering mercy, murmuring Kollner's motto like a mantra. But it was a fragile peace.

One day, tranced-out toward the end of a long shift, Lianna found herself shooting a second line of topic into a doll with only a glancing leg wound. It had stopped breathing, was jerking like a beached fish. She

pinched its nostrils, tried to give it heart massage and mouth-to-mouth, and it died anyway.

She made three steps away from the corpse before she threw up.

Afterward a kind of numb calm descended. She tagged the body, checked the last traces (all dead), headed back in. That was when she got into the fight.

The medicare center was poised on the flat roof of a warehouse almost totally buried in sand: a hundred plastic panel walls tilted against each other like a flock of wings fallen to rest. Lianna scored a Coke to wash out her mouth, sat outside in the last of the sunset, looking at the vast expanse of scrubby dunes that saddled away south and east.

The dunes that had protected Holland for hundreds of years had been vastly expanded when the sea rose, extended for thirty kilometers inland to save rich cropland from salt seep, dunes and pine forests that ran all the way south to Roscoff, interrupted only by coastal cites walled and diked like medieval fortresses. Maybe a billion square kilometers of unzoned outlaw territory, beyond policing. Creepy rumors about doll cities under the sand, killer-doll patrols picking off loner techs, porn rings jacking warm bodies for gross-out videos, freedom fighters turning dolls into terrorists.

Campfire stories, spun out in the dead hours between shifts. Lianna had heard them all when she'd started her sentence, but now she was beginning to take them seriously. After the psychokiller scenario, she knew it was real, and she'd heard other stories, too, live bodies triaged and tagged for recovery vanishing before pickup. What Darlajane B. had said, deprogramming dolls . . . where had they all gone?

Fairies.

Maybe two dozen zeks were lounging around, waiting for shift's end. A dozen more coming out, changed into street clothes, hair slicked from the showers. Kollner's crew. The new kid was in the middle of a bunch of people, making a lot of noise, his voice carrying to Lianna as they drew near.

" . . . I tell you, man, the guy's a righteous, down-home cannibal freak. Easiest five ecus I ever did make, and he needs a *regular* supply!"

Someone laughed, and the kid said, "Yeah, well take a look at this, man; I just now cut it out. So nice and fresh, I do believe I could try a slice myself."



Lianna saw him open a silvery cold-lok bag, the people around him laughing, crowding close, making gross-out noises. The kid smiling proudly, then going down on his ass as Lianna snatched the bag away, tipped out the wet red mass of liver, then grabbed his neck, tried to force his face into it.

Saying over and over, "You like this? You like *this*! — until she was pulled away, and Kollner was in front of her, asking her to calm down.

Lianna took a deep breath, another. "All right," she said. Trying not to think of what she wanted to do (not kill him, not not not kill him), chip swelling in her right eye so there was just a little tunnel through which she could glimpse the world, a fluttering darkness she was on the edge of falling into.

"This piece of shit isn't worth it," Kollner said, gentle as ever. "You know that. All right?"

"All right." Very quietly.

Lianna let Kollner put his arm around her shoulders and steer her aside, aware in her peripheral vision of the kid getting up, saying something because he had to try and regain face.

"Shit, not as if the guy's a real cannibal —"

Kollner blocking her when she tried to get the kid again, his arms out, flinching as she feinted right and left, nails scraping the side of his face. Still in front of her, so she kicked for his balls, and he stepped back and said, "All right —," and caught her foot and dumped her on her ass, suddenly angry. Leaned over her, big hands making fists. . . .

And then he was down, body arching on heels and neck. People pushed Lianna out of the way, a woman putting her foot under Kollner's head as another pried at his mouth to make sure he hadn't swallowed his tongue. Kollner shaking, muscles bunching at random. Eyes rolled back, animal sounds. Lianna flashed on how she must have looked when she'd been struck down in the sex arcade, felt shame.

One of the crew in her face, shouting at her, telling her Kollner was under real heavy manners; he couldn't afford to lose his temper at no one, he'd had so many fits already. Lianna stood and took it, feeling very cool, very remote. Other zeks turning on her, hard words. She took it all to her, locking her certainty about what she needed to do, ran only when she saw two circling to get behind her, leaped the low parapet, and ran across sand, away from jeers and catcalls and a hail of Coke cans.

Ran until her chip started to flash dark warning chevrons across her sight, sat down and watched as in one direction the center turned over for the night shift, floodlights on shining sails; in the other, tiny fires twinkled and shifted in unfathomable darkness.

No one came to look for her — she was just a chipped zek, after all — and the few people about did no more than glance at her as she made her way through the medicare center to the doll cages.

Even so, she needed a boost to do it: two of Darlajane B.'s little black pills that clung to her tongue and had to be washed down with a mouthful of Coke. They started to come on as she went down the ramp of polymerized sand into the cages. A fine tremor in her musculature, but somehow strong, as though she were a fine-tuned machine. Lights growing halos. Things taking on a lacquered appearance, an increase in reality's density.

Down the ramp into a long, low-arched space lit by buzzing fluorescents. Lianna could see the snake of bright plasma that writhed in every long tube. Dolls sprawled or squatted in enclosures marked only by low mesh fences. All dressed in the same white one-piece paper coveralls. A few standing at dispensers, sucking sugary pap. One or two curled up on scuffed sand, dead waiting for disposal in the morning; the few dolls that died natural deaths always died at night.

As Lianna walked toward the nearest enclosure, every doll turned to look at her. They all had the same face, the same empty gaze. Multiplied a thousand times, their gaze laid a weight over Lianna's entire skin.

Cameras up amongst the lights: though she was pretty certain no one would be watching, Lianna started to get the shakes. She chose at random, told the doll to follow her, and, as one, every doll stood up.

Lianna felt herself begin to lose it, grabbed the shoulders of the doll across the fence from her, half-lifted, half-dragged it across. It weighed almost nothing, light as a bird. She laid a hand on its shoulder and hissed in its ear that it must come with her. Walked it up the ramp, into the empty locker room, told it to stand still, and got her locker open, dragged out her kit, spilling instruments, tremors amplifying into shivers. She had to lock her free hand around her wrist as she slashed and slashed at the doll's shoulder, white coveralls and blue skin slicing cleanly to show flesh and then blood that ran down its arm, started dripping from its fingers.

Lianna made herself fold up her kit, shut her locker. Then walked out,

steering the doll with a hand on its good shoulder. Only one person passed them as they crossed the compound, and Lianna said, "Found this one wandering around; clean up can't count again," but the man hardly glanced at her.

She couldn't go out the main gate, but there was only a single mesh fence around the complex, and in places it sagged in bellying swaths. Lights of a warehouse arena off in the distance, sound of shots, the occasional war whoop. She managed to drag a section of links free of sand, shoved the doll through, and crawled after.

Then all she had to do was hike down the road to her usual tram stop, walk her prisoner unremarked past the doll driver with the scarred face, make it squat with half a dozen other dolls in the back. Its wound had stopped bleeding, but the torn sleeve of its coverall was stained maroon from shoulder to cuff. A babushka glared disapproval, powdered face pinched and sour beneath a purple cartwheel hat with little mirrors dangling and winking from its brim. Lianna smiled at her, and she looked away.

During the ride, Lianna couldn't help noticing all over again how many dolls there were, out and about amongst the human strollers. She let herself go to shivers, tried not to laugh, jamming hands between thighs, hunching shoulders. She could have taken any of them — no, they had errands, would have started squalling. But it would have been less risk! The babushka still glaring: Lianna bit the insides of her cheek. She was crazy. . . .

"You're crazy," Darlajane B. said. "You think I have anything to do with it? You *are* crazy!"

They were on the flat roof of the residential building, wind blowing around them, rattling the panes of the cloches where Darlajane grew pot and plants she'd spliced herself. Lianna had found her stargazing, working out her astrology chart with the aid of a fifteen-centimeter telescope and a hypertext almanac. Now the v/r goggles were pushed up on Darlajane's tattooed scalp, and the telescope was running through its tracking program on auto, motors making abrupt spurts of noise.

Darlajane B. said, "Where have you put it? In your room, I suppose." Her voice had acquired a harsh edge, a German accent Lianna had never heard before, but otherwise the old woman seemed quite composed.

"What else? I locked the door, but I don't think combat dolls know about doors anyway."

"It's the first place the peepers will think of looking. Crazy *and* stupid."

"It's not going to be there long," Lianna said, and told the old woman what she wanted done.

"Ach, that kind of thing I gave up a long time ago. And my associates wouldn't like it. At my age, I have to behave myself."

Lianna thought, I'm not going to hurt her, and pushed Darlajane B. up against the parapet, holding tightly to the lapels of her leather jacket. The old woman swore, tried to push back; she smelled of patchouli oil, of dust, of sour age. Through the tunnel of her chip, feeling very close to the edge, Lianna said, "I'm not going to hurt you. You know I can't. But if I'm caught, I'll have the peepers analyze my blood. I dropped a couple of your pills, and I'll tell them all about it. I guess supplying narcotics to zeks is illegal, or my chip wouldn't be set the way it is."

"Let me go. Let me go right now." Darlajane B.'s voice had a measure of steel in it, and Lianna stepped back. "A clear night, too, and Saturn's setting in an hour. I haven't had a chance to look at him yet. I always like to look at him. You are a nuisance, girl."

"All you have to do is do what you do to your cats; it isn't much."

"It isn't as straightforward as you think. And listen to me: I'm not doing this because of your silly little threat. Peepers run my thing; you think they'll let you hurt that?" Darlajane B. looked thoughtfully at Lianna. "You are a long way from where you began. Three months you nothing more than a frightened hausfrau were, a murderess maybe, but a frightened and confused murderess. Now you of myself remind, when I was your age, full of piss and vinegar. Without your chip, I think you could have killed me like you killed your husband."

But Lianna was looking out beyond the parapet, into wild, windy darkness where, as always, scattered fires burned, small and strange as stars. She said, "Nice try. But I'm not angry, and that's the frame my chip works in. Do you believe in fairies, Darlajane?"

"Many kinds of people live out there. Once, I myself . . . but the revolution is over."

"Is it?"

"Let's just do it, before I lose my nerve."

\* \* \*

THEY DID it in the old woman's kitchen, the doll strapped to the scarred wooden table. Half a dozen cats sat atop a huge icebox, watching with feigned boredom as Lianna reassured the doll and Darlajane B. administered curarine to immobilize its eyes. The old woman had hooked on spectacles that covered her eyes with lensed turrets. After the curarine, she took a measure of milky liquid from a battered silvery thermos, administered drops to the inside corners of the doll's eyes. Its head was cradled on a block of black rubber.

"The culture last month I got," she said. "Bootlegged from ICI, they work better than the strains I was using, get to work straightaway on building connections down the optic nerves. In a couple of hours, they'll be all through the cortex, increasing connectivity." She screwed down the thermos top, put the culture in the bottom of the icebox; fembots grew best, with fewest spontaneous somatic mutations, in the dense molecular architecture of water at four degrees Celsius.

"I love these machines," Darlajane B. said. "All my family from arthritis have suffered; I have little workers in my joints, burning away calcification as fast as it forms. So I can still sit zazen; I can still plug in chips."

She unrolled a surgical kit, set a microsurgery scaffolding over the doll's face. A set of miniature thumb-operated waldos peeled back the doll's eyelids, inserted something that looked like a little spade between eye and socket. Humming some old pop tune, Darlajane began to dismantle the doll's old behavioral chip. The turrets of her pop-eyed spectacles clicked as they zoomed in and out of focus. Working had calmed her, routine dictating mood. She talked about the old days as she worked: anticreationist marches, antislavery terrorist campaigns, weird alliances between radical Christians, Muslims, counterculture activists that had foundered on theological schisms Lianna couldn't begin to follow. "How it was, in those days," Darlajane explained, "was that we wanted to set dolls free, but the others wanted to destroy them. Scapegoats, you know? Servants of Satan? Well, Christianity has declined ever since the millennium; I am not surprised. *They* said we were worse than the capitalists, daring to try to save inhuman things through technology. *We* said dolls had no original sin; they were closer to angels than devils. Ach, well, it was a long time ago, and we all lost."

A second thermos held a rack of aluminum slides, where fembots built

hair-thin biochips molecule by molecule on wafer templates. A slide went under the scaffolding; waldos plucked the chip from its carrier. Lianna watched the old woman slide it into place, imagining a swarming galaxy of machines small as bacteria spinning pseudoneurons from the chip's hardware down the shaft of the optic nerve, spreading through the cortex, wiring a complex web in parallel with the doll's linear neuron network. Do to the doll as had been done to her. . . . The mote in her right eye suddenly felt huge, a splinter thrust into the raw surface of her brain jelly.

The old woman was working on the doll's other eye, when Nicole said, "Ey, where did you get him?"

For a moment, Lianna thought her chip had cut in. Darlajane said calmly, "You need your fix; it's on the second shelf. Take it and go. This you do not need to see."

Nicole rummaged in the big icebox, fog pouring around her. She wore nothing but a short kimono-style robe, belted very tight. She said, "This hurts our thing, Lianna, I'll hurt you. I swear it."

Darlajane B. slid in the second chip. "No one will it hurt unless the wrong people hear of it. And I do it only once, so you need not worry about yourself. Have what you want? Then go. Tomorrow I will talk to you." When Nicole was gone, she said, "That one is too much trouble for an old woman like me."

"She needs her stuff," Lianna said hopefully. The shock of hearing Nicole's voice was tingling in the tips of her fingers.

"Think that comforts me? Here we are nearly finished. Used not to take so long, but necessary to remove the chips already there it is, too many essential subroutines on them. Used to have a search-and-destroy strain of bugs that burned out conditioning areas, but it won't work with these new chips where data are holographically coded."

"You did this a lot."

"I was trying to tell you that. But like trying to bail out the polders with a teaspoon it was. The ones I cured lived only half a dozen years at best, and always there were more. This one you stole, it is two hundred ecus' worth of meat, nothing more. And how many combat dolls are there, in just that one arena? And in all the arenas in the world? You save this one, give it a new life, and in six years it is gone. Even if you blow the hatcheries, as some friends of mine once did, there will always be more dolls. We depend on them now. Without them, no minimum wage, no

voluntary unemployment, no unlimited food and gadgets. Too late to change society, girl."

"I did it for myself," Lianna said softly.

Darlajane B. pushed back her spectacles, swung away the scaffolding. "Ach, of course you did. Little hausfrau, you should have served out your sentence. You know now there is no going back."

"I know," Lianna said. "Is it finished?"

"One more thing," Darlajane B. said. She shoved an ampoule of oily liquid into a hypo, and she pushed the snout against the doll's shoulder. The doll twitched as the charge went in. "Thyrotropic hormone," the old woman said. "Lipodroplet packaged, what they use to bring sex toys to puberty. And now we are done. You stay here this night; your doll here will need the time to learn. But tomorrow I do not want to know where you are."

Lianna woke in the middle of the night to abrupt bursts of sound, the flicker of the telly. It was an old solid-state model, its thick glass screen giving off blue light eerie as hard radiation. The doll squatted in front of it, zapping through Dutch and French and British and German and Common Net channels, blink blink blink blink, one every ten seconds. Eyes wide to the welter of images, he didn't look around when Lianna put her hand on his bandaged shoulder.

She sat behind him a long time, news programs segueing into shopping channels, soaps, porno. Except for his thumb on the zapper, the doll didn't move. At last she left a pitcher of glucose-spiked orange juice beside him and fell into bed again, woke from uneasy, sliding dreams to the buzz of her phone, loud and insistent above the telly's choppy murmur.

Lianna sleepily acknowledged the call. A computer-generated face floating in a mesh of bright lines looked out at her. It was familiar from a hundred telly serials. It was the Peace Police.

"You are under arrest," it said, voice not quite synched with lips.

"W-what charge?"

"Grand larceny, illegal modification of a series-four kobold. Officers will arrive soon. Your room is locked. Please do not attempt to leave."

The face vanished like a burst soap bubble; the phone's hard-copy slot extruded a tongue of flimsy, an arrest warrant. "But I'm already a convict," Lianna said, and jumped when someone hammered at the door.

It wasn't the peepers: it was Darlajane B. She had to use her master key to override the computer-operated lock. A heavy canvas bag was slung over her shoulder. "You come with me right now," she said. "That bitch Nicole sold us both. Looking to take over my stake, I'd guess."

Something plucked at Lianna's waist. The doll. He had put on the bottom half of his coveralls, cinched with one of Lianna's scarves.

"Hot damn, *mon ami*," the doll said. "We go, *ja*? Heavy weather in from the east, storm fronts over all areas by midnight."

Darlajane B. said, "One thing we don't need."

"I need him. He wants to come — why not?"

"If I had any sense, I'd leave you with him: you deserve each other. Did they reprogram your chip? Of course not; they wouldn't have authorization. Surprised they used any channels at all." Darlajane watched Lianna pull on jeans, a checkered work shirt. "You're ready? Good. My friends will be in a hurry to close this down; you can bet on it."

**W**HAT HAD once been the hotel's parking garage was empty, except for one of the maintenance crew sorting garbage. The doll caught its arm, looked into its eyes. "Friend, *ami*. *Pouvez-vous me dire*?

Lianna told him, "You've been changed. You understand?"

The changeling doll considered. It said at last, in French, "And I awoke and found me here on the cold hill's side."

Darlajane B. was at the top of the service ramp, kneeling to look under the half-raised door at the street. "They're already here," she said.

Lianna looked. Early morning, the street empty except for a police runabout parked right outside the crib's entrance. Nowhere to run without attracting attention, and any moment now the peepers would be back outside.

Lianna felt a strange, floating detachment, the way she'd felt after her husband's death. It had happened early in the morning, and most of the next day, she'd wandered the big house, waiting for justice to strike her down. In the end, she'd called the peepers herself, and as she'd waited for them, had at last felt peace.

Perhaps her chip had blacked her out for a second, memory treacherous now, a swamp with vast blank areas in which she could sink forever. Darlajane B. clutched her arm. Lianna saw two men leave the crib. One



walked to the runabout, the other toward the service entrance.

The changeling stood hand in hand with the maintenance doll. "Friend," he said, half a dozen times in half a dozen languages. He tapped the doll's chest, his own. "We know why."

Lianna saw that the shaven-headed peeper was very close to the door now. Getting to her feet was very hard; her chip was bearing down, working on peripheral clues. One word from the peeper, and it would shut her down.

"Vamoose," the changeling said.

Lianna and Darlajane B. followed.

It was not a way Lianna would have chosen: past curtain after curtain of plastic sheeting into the warmth and red light of the incubation chamber. It had once been a coldroom. Now naked dolls hung from racks, bodies wrapped in webs of tubing, heads cased in swaths of black plastic. Their bellies were grossly distended, like five-year pregnancies at term: the disease Darlajane had given them had turned their livers into vast controlled malignancies, half their body weight. Pink goo, rich in peptides, ran through clear tubing from the dolls to fractionation columns. The overheated room was filled with a rich, sweet smell that made Lianna gag.

Darlajane pawed at a jury-rigged panel, pulling wires, shouting she was damned if Nicole was going to have them. Peristaltic pumps slowed, stopped; black-masked dolls began to twitch, trying to draw air with collapsed lungs. The maintenance doll had vanished; Lianna saw the changeling duck through a hatch low in the wall, followed it through a low, narrow passage into a foul-smelling nest lit by a dim bulb where half a dozen dolls curled in sleep. Cockroaches skittered from Lianna's feet. One dropped in her hair, and she fought back a scream. The nest was the beginning of a kind of tunnel, suddenly sloping down. Little lights, most of them not working, sketched a dwindling perspective.

"Maintenance levels," Darlajane B. said. She was out of breath, and leaned heavily on the arm Lianna offered.

The tunnel opened onto a wide, well-lit corridor, tiled walls and floor swathed with cables and pipes and ducts. Dolls moved past in different directions. Most were naked, blue skin streaked and crusted with dirt. The invisible army of morlocks that ran civilization.

A shot behind them: a man's voice, botched by echoes. Lianna felt a

wave of dizziness, the chip in her right eye almost triggered. Panic flaring, she ran, scattering dolls, ran down tiled tunnels until warning chevrons crammed her sight.

Lianna leaned against a grimy junction box, breathing hard. The chevrons slowly faded. She was in a narrow, grimy, ill-lit tunnel, tiles stained with black mold. Dolls moved past in an irregular single file, identical faces glancing at Lianna as they passed. A figure taller than any doll hobbled out of shadow: Darlajane B. When Lianna asked where the changeling was, the old woman said, "You thought he'd stick with us? They aren't human, girl. Mostly baboon, with maybe 10 percent of the genes that separate us from the apes. And when they're changed, it is into something new. . . . I'd forgotten that. . . . Something strange, perhaps something wonderful."

"I freed him. . . ."

"You freed him to chose. You wanted him as your pet? Well, too late. He's chosen. So must you. Listen."

Somewhere down the length of the tunnel, above the rustle of dolls padding past: a faint murmur sound of human voices. Lianna's heart caught on a barb of despair.

Darlajane B. rummaged through her canvas bag. She said, "Pull your chip is what I'm going to have to do. Bonded into your optic nerve it is, so I will cause damage. No time for any other measure. You willing?"

Lianna felt as though she were floating. Before she could say anything, light burst behind Darlajane. In glare's center the peeper said, "You run, but you can't hide."

Deeply tanned face, gray crew cut going white at the edges, belly straining his chalk-stripe shirt, hung over the belt of his neatly creased jeans: Lianna had seen him coming and going in the crib a dozen times. He had a big flashlight in one hand, a pistol in the other. His badge was fixed to the strap of his shoulder holster. He said, "Bad times come down, Darlajane. You and your friend get up against the wall. We finish this right here."

"We can talk about this," Darlajane said.

One of the dolls had stopped to watch the humans. It wore stained white trousers, had a bandage on one shoulder. It was the changeling.

The peeper said, "You're out of business. What do we need to talk about?"

"That little whore. You'd trust her?"

Other dolls clustered around the changeling. They looked strange, grim, alert. One had little copper wires sewn around the rims of its ears; another, a ring through its nose. All had parallel scars seaming their cheeks. Lianna was so afraid that she couldn't move. She could only watch and wonder.

The peeper said, "We'll trust Nicole as much as we trusted you." The muzzle of his pistol looked huge as he pointed it at Lianna, at Darlajane B. He said, "Be easy, and it's over. Just a flash in the head —"

His pistol went up and went off, blowing fragments of tile from the ceiling. Half a dozen dolls were swarming over the peeper; he staggered, screaming when small, strong fingers found one of his eyes. And Darlajane said, "Knew I had this," brought out a big pistol, both hands around its crosshatched grip. The dolls dropped away, and the peeper's head came up. He stared at Darlajane B., and then she shot him. Three times: chest, chest again, and a wild shot that took him in the arm and spun him around as he flew backward. The noise was deafening in the tunnel's vault.

Lianna was on her feet, back pressed against slimy tile. She saw the changeling step forward from the others. *Fairies*, she thought, and a cold, clean wind blew through her.

Then Darlajane B. in her face, saying, "We've got five minutes if we're lucky. Now just hold still!" Something in her hand, flashing silver: Lianna's right eye exploded and went out.

In darkness, Lianna felt sand pitch and yaw beneath her. She lost her balance and sat down hard. The right side of her head swollen, tender, hollow. She couldn't blink; her eye felt peeled. Cautiously probing, Lianna found bandages over cotton wadding — then small, cold hands gripped hers.

"No good," the changeling said.

Lianna couldn't remember anything after Darlajane's knife had come down. She asked, "Where's the old woman?"

"Vamoosed. She left you things."

Only gauze over her left eye. She unrolled it, blinked tears. The changeling was a blurred shadow in front of her. Beyond were moonlit dune crests, the red-and-green lights strung along Den Hague's barrier wall. Free, Lianna thought. A cold, clean wind blew through her. Free.

The changeling pushed something toward her. It was Darlajane's canvas bag.

The changeling said in singsong recitative: "'Fembot cultures, chip templates, surgery kit. All you need to make over as many dolls as you can. Time to change my identity again, move on. Good luck, girl.'"

"And your friends?"

"All gone. I follow you."

"Where did they come from?"

"Found me, left me. Brothers and sisters of the knife everywhere underground."

Getting to her feet was hard: it felt as if all her blood surged and burned in her empty socket. Wiping sympathetic tears from her left eye, Lianna saw will-o'-the-wisp fires flicker far off in deep, dark wilderness. She told the changeling, "They're out there, too."

Darlajane B. had been wrong. The revolution had not finished. It was not any person or even any movement. It was an idea. It took hold where it would. Lianna thought of disaffected kids, of changelings infiltrating unnoticed everywhere in the straight world. Remembered the tram driver, his scarred cheeks. There had always been people living on the edge: now there were two kinds, changing and being changed, changing each other. All this came to her in an instant; she would spend the rest of her life untangling it.

She said, "I suppose we'd better find out what's out there," and swung the heavy canvas bag onto her shoulder, started down the slope of sand. The changeling gripped her hand, skipping along to keep pace with her. After a while Lianna began to sing.





# A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

## LEAPING THE ABYSS

**N**O ONE can replace Isaac Asimov. For decades he has been, as Carl Sagan remarked, "our great explainer." Here in F&SF he has ranged far and wide in the landscape of science, shedding light and warmth and humor.

The editors have kindly asked me to write a column for this, my all-time favorite magazine, which gave me my first break (an abrupt, fake-sophisticated short story — fantasy! — in 1965). I have a lifetime subscription to F&SF, and never thought that an issue would appear without a tasty Asimov column to start me off on my evening's reading.

I can't replace Isaac and won't try. Instead, I will attempt a column of reflections on science, science fiction, and my own interactions between these vastly different, yet strangely intertwined, worlds. You will see essays that are at times deeply personal — like this first

one — and at other times, reports from the front lines of scientific skirmishing. Along the way I'll try to explain some science, but also some scientists — creatures sometimes as odd as their subjects.

In a world increasingly driven by science and its burly sidekick, technology, many people feel distant from these interests. Isaac was the best of all at bridging the chasm between the ordinary world and the complex realm of science. Thinking of him this way, I recalled a visit I made to an old friend last year, and how the scientific fraternity shares more than mere ideas.

Stephen Hawking seemed slightly worse, as always.

It is a miracle that he has clung to life for over twenty years with Lou Gehrig's disease. Each time I see him I feel that this will be the last, that he cannot hold on to such a thin thread for much longer.

I was in Cambridge briefly, talk-

ing to friends at the Institute for Astronomy. I worked here in 1976 with Martin Rees, a prominent astrophysicist who taught me about extragalactic matters. He is now director of the snug, homey warren of offices and computer rooms, so different from the bright, tile-and-steel atmosphere of American scientific citadels.

Over lunch at Kings' College, Martin politely pointed out why an idea of mine about quasars was nonsense. One of the important things scientists do for each other is knock bad ideas in the head before they really get born; this saves me much time and public embarrassment. Chastened, I wandered through the cool, atmospheric turns of the colleges, the worn wood and gray stones reflecting the piping of student voices and squeaks of rusty bicycles.

The enormous success of his *A Brief History of Time* has made Stephen a curious kind of cultural icon. At his office the staff was wary of visitors, plainly suspecting me of harboring a crank theory of the universe I wanted to press into his field of view. I entered the familiar office and found it unchanged.

His shrunken form lolled in his motorized chair, staring out, rendered goggle-eyed by his thick glasses — but a strong spirit animated all

he said. You could sense the inner fire.

He had lost his vocal cords years ago to an emergency tracheotomy. His gnarled, feeble hands could not hold a pen. For a while after the operation he was completely cut off from the world — an unsettling analogy with the fate of mathematical observers who plunge into black holes, their signals to the outside red-shifted and slowed, by gravity's grip, to dim, whispering oblivion.

A Silicon Valley firm had come to the rescue. Engineers devised tailored, user-friendly software and a special keyboard for him. His frail hand moved across it with crablike intent. The software is deft, and he could build sentences quickly. I watched him rapidly flit through the menu of often-used words on his liquid crystal display, which hung before him in his wheelchair. It has been such a success that the Silicon Valley folk now supplied units to similarly afflicted people worldwide.

"Please excuse my American accent," the speaker mounted behind the wheelchair said with a California inflection. He had this entire remark coded by two keystrokes.

Though I had been here before, again I was struck that this man who had suffered such an agonizing

physical decline had on his walls several large posters of a person very nearly his opposite: Marilyn Monroe. I mentioned her and he responded instantly, tapping one-handed on his keyboard, so that soon his transduced voice replied, "Yes, she's wonderful. Cosmological."

Hawking's great politeness paradoxically put me ill at ease; I was acutely aware of the many demands on his time, and after all, I had just stopped by to talk shop.

"Don't worry," his mechanical voice said flatly, "many of them come here just to stare at me." The huge success of *A Brief History of Time* has made him a curious kind of world-scale metaphor. He wonders himself how many of the starlets and rock stars who mentioned the book on talk shows actually read it.

I remarked that to me the book was like a French impressionist painting of a cow, meant to give a glancing essence, not the real, smelly animal. Few would savor the details. Stephen took off from this to discuss some ideas currently booting around the physics community about the origin of the universe, the moment just after the Big Bang.

"For years my early work with Roger Penrose seemed to be a disaster for science," Stephen said. "It showed that the universe must

have begun with a singularity, if Einstein's general theory of relativity is correct. That appeared to indicate that science could not predict how the universe would begin as the laws would break down at the point of singularity, of infinite density."

I recalled that I had spoken to him about mathematical methods of getting around this, one evening at a party in King's College. There were analogies to methods in elementary quantum mechanics, methods he was trying to carry over into this surrealistic terrain.

"It now appears that the way the universe began can indeed be determined, using imaginary time."

We discussed this a bit. Stephen had been using a mathematical device in which time is replaced by imaginary time, as a notational convenience. This changes the nature of the equations, so he could use some ideas from the simple quantum world. In the new equations, a kind of tunneling occurs, in which the universe, before the Big Bang, has many different ways to pass through the singularity. With imaginary time, one can calculate the chances for a given kind of tunneling from *before* the big bang, through the singularity, into our early universe — ie, after the beginning of time as we know it.

"Sure, the equations can be in-

terpreted that way," I argued, "but it's really a trick, isn't it?"

Stephen said, "Yes, but perhaps an insightful trick."

"We don't have a truly deep understanding of time, so replacing real time with imaginary time doesn't mean much to us."

"Imaginary time is a new dimension, at right angles to ordinary, real time. Along this axis, if the universe satisfies the 'no boundary' condition, we can do our calculations. This condition says that the universe has no singularities or boundaries, in the imaginary direction of time. If the 'no boundary' condition is satisfied, there will be no beginning or end, to imaginary time, just as there is no beginning or end to a path on the surface of the Earth."

"If the path goes all the way around the Earth," I said. "But of course, we don't know that in imaginary time, there won't be a boundary."

"My intuition says there will be no blocking in that space, so our calculations make sense."

"Sense is just the problem, isn't it? Imaginary time is just a mathematical convenience." I shrugged in exasperation at the span between cool mathematical spaces and the immediacy of the raw world; a common tension in doing physics. "It's unrelated to how we *feel* time.

The seconds sliding by. Birth and death."

"True. Our minds work in real time, which begins at the Big Bang, and will end, if there is a Big Crunch. Consciousness will come to an end at a singularity."

"Not a great consolation," I said.

"The 'no boundary' condition seems to imply that the universe will be in a state of high order at one end of real time, but will be disordered at the other end of time. This means that disorder increases in one direction of time. We define this to be the direction of increasing time. When we record something in our memory, the disorder of the universe will increase. This explains why we remember events only in what we call the past, and not in the future."

"Remember what you predicted in 1980 about final theories, like this?" I chided him.

"I suggested we might find a complete unified theory, by the end of the century. At that time, the best candidate seemed to be  $N=8$  supergravity. Now, ten years later, it appears that this theory may be an approximation to a more fundamental theory, called superstrings. I think I was a bit optimistic, to hope that we would have solved the problem by the end of the century. But I still think there's a fifty-fifty chance that we will find a



complete unified theory in the next twenty years."

"So we won't be done in time for the millennium?"

Stephen made the transponder laugh dryly. "You will have to get your faith elsewhere."

"I've always suspected that the structure never ends, as we look to smaller and smaller scales — and neither will the theories."

"It is possible that there is no ultimate theory of physics at all. Instead, we will keep on discovering new layers of structure. But it seems that physics gets simpler, and more unified, the smaller the scale on which we look. And it seems that there is an ultimate length scale, the Planck length, below which spacetime may just not be defined. So I think there will be a limit to the number of layers of structure, and there will be some ultimate theory, which we will discover if we are smart enough."

I've not worked on cosmology since some papers in the late 1970s; I'm not smart enough. Mathematical physics is like music, which a young and zesty spirit can best seize and use, as did Mozart.

We began discussing recent work on "baby universes" — bubbles in space time. To us, space-time is like the sea seen from an ocean liner, smooth and serene. Up close, though, it's waves and bubbles. At

extremely fine scales, pockets and bubbles of space-time can form at random, sputtering into being, then dissolving. Arcane details of particle physics suggest that sometimes — rarely, but inevitably — these bubbles could grow.

This might have happened a lot at the instant just immediately after the Big Bang. Indeed, some properties of our universe may have been created by the space-time foam that roiled through those infinitesimally split seconds. Studying this possibility uses the "worm-hole calculus" which samples the myriad possible frothing bubbles (and their connections, called worm-holes). Averaging over this foam in a mathematical sense, Stephen and others have tried to find out whether a final, rather benign universe like ours was an inevitable outcome of that early turbulence. The jury isn't in on this point, and may be out forever — the calculations are tough, guided by intuition rather than facts. Deciding whether they really meaningfully predict anything is a matter of taste. This recalls Oscar Wilde's aphorism, that in matters of great import, style is always more important than substance.

If this picture of the first split-second is remotely right, much depends on the energy content of the foam. The energy to blow up

these bubbles would be compensated by an opposite, negative energy, which comes from the gravitational attraction of all the matter in the bubble. If the outward pressure just balances the inward attraction (a pressure, really) of the mass, then you could get a universe much like ours — rather mild, with space-time flat on such relatively tiny scales as our solar system, and even flat on the size range of our galaxy.

It turns out that such bubbles could even form right now. An entirely separate space-time could pop into existence in your living room, say. It would start unimaginably small, then balloon to the size of a cantaloupe — but not before your very eyes, because for quite fundamental reasons, you can't see it.

"They don't form in space, of course," Stephen said. "It doesn't mean anything to ask where in space these things occur."

"They're cut off from us, after we made them," I said. "No relics, no fossil?"

"I do not think there could be."

"Like an ungrateful child who doesn't write home." When talking about immensities, I sometimes grasp for something human.

"It would not form in our space, but rather as another space-time."

We discussed for a while some

speculations about this I had put into a novel published over a decade ago, *Timescape*. I had used Cambridge and the British scientific style in it, along with some wide-ranging talks I had enjoyed with Stephen — all suitably disguised, of course. Such enclosed space-times I had termed "onion universes," since in principle they could have further locked-away space-times inside them, too, and so on. It is an odd sensation when a guess turns out to have some substance — as much as anything as gossamer as these ideas can be said to be substantial. Again, the image of mathematical physics as French impressionism.

"So they form and go," I mused. "Vanish. Between us and these other universes lies absolute nothingness, in the exact sense — no space or time, no matter, no energy."

"There can be no way to reach them," his flat voice said. "The gulf between us and them is unbridgable. It is beyond physics because it is truly nothing, not physical at all."

Stephen likes the tug of the philosophical, and seemed amused by the notion that universes are simply one of those things that happen from time to time.

His nurse appeared for a bit of physical cleanup, and I left him. Inert confinement to a wheelchair

exacts a demeaning toll on dignity, but he showed no reaction to the daily round of being cared for by another in the most intimate way. Perhaps for him, it even helps the mind to slip free of the world's rub.

I sat in the common room outside his office, having tea and talking to some of his post-doctoral students. They were working on similarly wild ideas and were quick, witty, keenly observant as they sipped their strong, dark Ceylonese tea. A sharp crew, perhaps a bit jealous of Stephen's time. They were no doubt wondering who this guy was, nobody they had ever heard of, a Californian with an accent tainted by southern nuances, somebody who worked in astrophysics and plasma physics — which was, in our age of remorseless specialization, quite a remote province. I didn't explain; after all, I really had no formal reason to be here, except that we were friends.

Stephen's secretary quietly came out and asked if I would join Stephen for dinner at Caius College. I had intended to eat in my favorite Indian restaurant, where the chicken vindaloo is a purging experience, and then simply rove the walks of Cambridge alone, for I love the atmosphere — but I instantly assented. Dinner at college high table was one of the legendary experiences of England. I could re-

member keenly each one I had attended; the repartee is sharper than the cutlery.

We made our way through misty twilight, student shouts echoing, his wheelchair jouncing over cobbled streets. He insisted on steering it himself, though his nurse hovered rather nervously. It had never occurred to me just how much of a strain on everyone there can be in round-the-clock care.

We wound through the ancient stone and manicured gardens, into Caius College. Students entering the dining hall made an eager rumpus. Stephen took the elevator and I ascended the creaking stairs. The faculty entered after the students, me following with the nurse.

The high table is literally so. They carefully placed Stephen with his back to the long, broad tables of undergraduates. I soon realized that this is because watching him eat, with virtually no lip control, is not appetizing. He follows a set diet that requires no chewing. His nurse must chop up his food and spoon feed him.

The dinner was noisy, with the year's new undergraduates staring at the famous Hawking. Stephen carried on a matter-of-fact, steady flow of conversation through his keyboard.

He was concerned that a unified theory of everything, even if we

could thrash our way through a thicket of mathematics to glimpse its outlines, might not be specific enough — that is, we would have a range of choices. Physics could end up dithering over arcane points, perhaps far from our particular primate experience. Here is where aesthetics might enter.

"If such a theory is not unique, one would have to appeal to some outside principle, which one might call God."

I frowned. "Not as the Creator, but as a referee?"

"He would decide which theory was more than just a set of equations, but described a universe that actually exists."

"This one."

"Or maybe all possible theories describe universes that exist. It is clear what it means to say that something exists — in questions like, does there exist a man with two left feet in Cambridge. One can answer this by examining every man in Cambridge. But there is no way that one can decide if a universe exists, if one is not inside it."

"The space-time Catch-22."

"So it is not easy to see what meaning can be given to the question, why does the universe exist. But it is a question that one can't help asking."

As usual, the ability to pose a question simply and clearly in no

way implied a similar answer — or than an answer even existed.

After the dining hall, high table moved to the senior common room upstairs. A long, polished table, comfortable chairs, the traditional crisp walnuts and ancient aromatic port, Cuban cigars. And somewhat arch conversation, occasionally skewered by a witty interjection from Stephen.

Someone mentioned Stephen Weinberg's statement, in *The First Three Minutes*, that the more we comprehend the universe, the more meaningless it seems. Stephen doesn't agree, and neither do I, but he has a better reason. "I think it is not meaningful in the first place to say that the universe is pointless, or that it is designed for some purpose."

I asked, "No meaning, then, to the pursuit of meaning?"

"To do that would require one to stand outside the universe, which is not possible."

Again the image of the separation between the observer and the object of study. The gulf. "Still," I persisted, "there is amazing structure we can see from inside."

"The overwhelming impression is of order. The more we discover about the universe, the more we find that it is governed by rational laws. If one liked, one could say that this order was the work of God."

One of the college fellows asked, "Rational faith?"

Stephen tapped quickly. "We shouldn't be surprised that conditions in the universe are suitable for life, but this is not evidence that the universe was designed to allow for life. We would call order by the name of God, but it would be an impersonal God. There's not much personal about the laws of physics."

Walnuts eaten, cigars smoked, it was time to go. When we left, Stephen guided his wheelchair through the shadowy reaches of the college, indulging my curiosity about a time-honored undergraduate sport: climbing Cambridge.

At night young men sometimes scrambled among the upper reaches of the steeply old buildings, scaling the most difficult points for the glory of it. Quite out of bounds, of course. Part of the thrill is eluding the proctors who scan the rooftops late at night, listening for the scrape of heels. There is even a booklet describing the triumphs and centuries-long history.

Stephen took me to a passage-way I had been through many times, a short-cut toward the Cam river between high, peaked buildings of undergraduate rooms. He said that it was one of the tough events, getting across that, and then scaling a steep, often slick roof beyond.

The passage looked to be about ten feet across. I couldn't imagine leaping that abyss from the slate-dark roofs. "All that distance?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Injured?"

"Yes."

"Killed?"

His eyes twinkled and he gave us a broad smile. "Yes." These Cambridge sorts had the real stuff, all right.

I thought this over as I took the train back to London the next day. By coincidence, I spent a long morning with Arthur C. Clarke. He had recovered nicely from his bout the year before with post-polio syndrome and was positively bouncy, in town from Sri Lanka for a checkup "and a few details."

This turned out to be receiving his Commander of the British Empire medal, tea with the queen, the works.

Beside this it seemed an afterthought that we were writing a book together. I wanted to discuss how I might attempt to follow his grand perspectives. We sipped tea, sitting on a comfy Victorian couch, and discussed the next billion years. Throughout, Arthur was quick, spontaneous, brimming with ideas.

The next day, on a jet bound west, I opened an envelope Stephen had given me. It was a transcript of

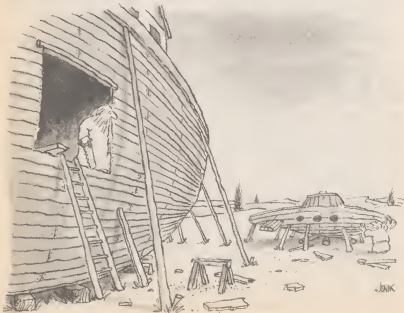
all his remarks the day before, and I have used it here to reproduce his style of conversation. Printed out on his wheelchair-computer, his sole link with us, the lines seem to come from a great distance.

Portraying the flinty faces of science — daunting complexity twinned with numbing wonder — demands both craft and art. Arthur painted with fiction, Stephen with his impressionistic views of vast, cool mathematical landscapes — and Isaac Asimov with clear, energetic, encompassing prose. To knit together our fraying times, to span the cultural abyss, demands all these approaches — and more, if we

can but invent them.

Both Stephen and Arthur had faced daunting physical constrictions with a renewed attack on the large issues, on great sweeps of space and time. They struggled without much fuss against the narrowing that is perhaps the worst element of infirmity. Stephen rapt with Marilyn, Arthur eagerly showing off his latest laptop computer — both seemed still deeply engaged with life, holding firmly against tides of entropy.

I had learned a good deal from these few days, I realized, and most of it not at all about cosmology.



*This unusual little story by F&SF regular Vance Aandahl postulates a dry United States. A desert stretching forever, a world where greenery is only a memory . . . and a hope.*

# Water

**By Vance Aandahl**

**A**S THE SUN rose behind her, Martha came trudging out of the Great Desert — head down, body sagging. She was parched and exhausted. Her stomach sobbed with hunger. At seventy-two, she could feel the weight of every day of every year with every step she took. But the wonder of what she carried in her womb filled her with a fierce determination and kept her going.

When she reached the outskirts of the city, Martha drank the last of her water, then forged on. It took her four hours to pass through the deserted suburb of Aurora, and nearly three more to cross East Denver. But at last she came to the deep-rock wells in Five Points, the wells where the city's last few survivors had gathered to live.

Martha went to the water shed and got in line. Helen Johnson was there, but when Martha said hello, Helen didn't lift her head. None of the people in line said a word. Starvation had emptied them . . . of words, desire, hope. They stood with downcast eyes like prisoners of war. When she reached the front, Martha signed for two quarts.

She found a spot of shade and drank both quarts. Without question, it was the most delicious water she'd ever tasted. She was three again, crouching in the deep, damp grass, drinking pure coldness from the nozzle of the garden hose in the lush green backyard jungle of her childhood.

Martha opened her eyes and looked around. Now there was no greenery at all, only the bleached facades of buildings glittering with mineral whiteness under the unforgiving sun, a few dead trees, their branches bare, and in the distance the snowless Rockies.

But soon . . . She touched her swollen abdomen and smiled. Soon all would be green again!

Two quarts of water had filled Martha's stomach enough to temporarily quiet her hunger pains. With a renewed step, she walked to the Temple of Gifts.

Two or three hundred people were assembled there, all of them skeletal with famine, their rib cages protruding, their eyes empty and ringed with fire. Dressed in rags like everyone else, three priests stood on the gift altar, beseeching disciples to come forth and give. A young man stepped up, and they handed him a kitchen knife.

"M-my life I give," he stammered, struggling to recite the gift prayer correctly, "s-s-so you may live."

"Blessed are those who give!" cried the priests.

"Give," moaned the crowd. "Give, give, give. . . ."

The young man plunged the blade into himself just below the breastbone, angling upward to puncture his heart, but he missed his target, and the priests had to help him. They twisted loose the knife and let him tumble off the altar into the gift cup.

The crowd closed in, surrounding the cup, the ones in back pressing forward like zombies, slowly but persistently, sighing with hunger.

Monsters, thought Martha.

She pushed her way through and climbed the steps of the altar. One of the priests offered her the knife. She glared at him and snatched it. The handle was sticky, and it trickled down her wrist.



I've been called into the desert, she thought. I've seen the great ships of the Circle Makers. And they have chosen *me* to bear their Seed, to nurture it and let it learn from my body what it needs to know.

She looked down at the gift cup and saw what was happening there. The blood-smeared mouths.

"I'm not doing this for you," she snarled. "I'm doing it for the whole goddamn planet."

She swung down the knife with all her strength, driving the blade into her belly until the point hit the hard rind of the Seed's shell.

The Seed exploded, ripping Martha apart and broadcasting a hundred million spores in all directions.

Wherever the spores settled, fine threads of green instantly rose up, growing up from the asphalt and brick and concrete and wood and dirt of the baked city, growing with time-lapse speed, growing inch by second, thickening and branching out, ramifying, sprouting leaves and buds, growing up and up and up, and the cannibals at the love cup were struck with self-loathing and drew back in revulsion from their feast and stood trembling as the forest grew up around them, grew taller and more verdant, forming an airy lacework canopy of foliage overhead, dappling everyone with light and shade, and lush bunches of orchidlike flowers blossomed everywhere in bursts of tropical colors, and the trees bore fruits and nuts, and the bushes bore berries, and the vines curling underfoot bore a multitude of gourds, and the vast network of roots beneath the soil bore a rich superabundance of edible tubers, and all of these newborn alien plants exuded moisture so that droplets of crystal-clear water formed on their leaves, and the air was filled with so much humidity, so much wetness and freshness, that the men and women who stood there breathing it suddenly remembered the long-forgotten smell of rain.



*Alan Dean Foster's wonderful stories have livened the pages of F&SF since 1976. Here he returns with a Mad Amos Malone story, in which the characters discover what it truly means to "have words."*

# Having Words

A Mad Amos Malone story

**By Alan Dean Foster**

**W**E WOULD like to go up into that country. There are many animals there. Good hunting, and fine places to camp." Bending toward the fire, Grass-in-Hair cut a choice piece of dog with his knife and passed it to his guest, who accepted the morsel with a grunt of thanks.

Amos Malone hunched closer to the tepee's central heat and chewed thoughtfully. When he'd ridden into the encampment early that morning, his imposing bulk had frightened the children, but now Grass-in-Hair's youngest son slept peacefully on the mountain man's legs, like a rabbit nestled in a bear's lap.

"Then why don't y'all just do it?"

Two-Feathers-Falling sniffed and repositioned the heavy robe that lay across his shoulders. It was late, and cold despite the fire. He would rather have been lying with First Woman, but Grass-in-Hair had insisted he be

present. As far as Two-Feathers-Falling was concerned, the meeting was at best a polite waste of time. Half as big as a bull buffalo the white man might be, but in this matter he could do nothing.

"Do you not think we would if we could?" he snapped.

The mountain man took no umbrage at the medicine man's tone. "What's stoppin' you?"

Two-Feathers-Falling shifted uncomfortably. He was no coward, but neither was he a fool. Grass-in-Hair let the silence lie as long as was decent, then saw that he was going to have to do the explaining himself.

"Tongue Kills lives there. He has claimed all that fine land for himself and will let no one else in. Not to camp, not to hunt. He is a greedy, evil person."

Malone swallowed the last scrap of dog, extracted his pipe from a pocket, and commenced to chew on the rose-hued stem, which protruded incongruously from the otherwise impenetrable black-wire mass of his beard. "How big's his tribe?"

"He has no tribe, no family. He is alone."

Malone's gaze narrowed. "Mean to say one warrior's been starin' down the whole Cheyenne nation?"

Two-Feathers-Falling spoke bitterly. "Tongue Kills is not a warrior. He is a medicine man. Like myself. But his medicine is too strong for me. And not just for us. No one dares to challenge him. Those who go into his country do not come out again."

"Except for One-Who-Carries-Stone-Behind-His-Head," said Grass-in-Hair. "He was a war chief of the Crow who announced to his people that he would kill the medicine man so they could move into his land. He did come out. But he lived only a few minutes after returning to his village." The old chief was solemn. "We heard the story when we were trading with the Crow up on the big river last autumn. Those who told it to us are known to be truthful men."

Malone tamped some brown dried substance into the bowl of his pipe. "What happened to him?"

"The warriors said that he was burned, all over." The chief's tone was hushed. "As if he had been in a great fire. His pony had been burned, too. It lived two days longer. Since then the Crow, like us, have stopped trying to go into that country." Grass-in-Hair looked wistful. "But we would still like to. I should like very much to hunt there. It is more land than

any one man needs. Even one as strong in medicine as Tongue Kills." He went silent, expectant.

The fire crackled. Along with silence, the tepee was permeated by the pungent rankness of cooked meat and unwashed men. Finally Malone said, "What makes you think I can help you?"

Grass-in-Hair looked up at his visitor. "I have met a few of the other white men who have passed through this country. Some spoke of you. They said you could do strange things."

Malone laughed as he lit his pipe with a blazing splinter from the fire. "They probably meant to say that I was strange."

"They also said you were crazy. Here." The disgruntled Two-Feathers-Falling meaningfully tapped the side of his head.

"Might be as they were right."

"Only a crazy man would challenge Tongue Kills."

Malone chose not to comment.

"If you will try to help us in this," said Grass-in-Hair, "I will give you my eldest daughter. She is a fine woman and will bear many children."

"Wal' now, that's a swell offer, sir, but I fear I must decline. I ain't quite ready yet to start in on a family."

Grass-in-Hair nodded, disappointed but understanding. "What, then, could we give you?"

"Your friendship . . . and mebbe that knife. I've kind o' taken a fancy to that knife of yours."

Grass-in-Hair held up the blade he'd used to partition the dog. It was a good knife, of the shiny black stone that always held its edge. But it was not irreplaceable.

"I would give it to you gladly. But I must tell you that I do not think it is worth risking one's life for." He gestured toward the visitor's belt. "You already have a knife of metal, one that is better."

Malone shook his head. "Not necessarily better. Just different. Somethin' about your knife calls out to me, Grass-in-Hair. And when somethin' calls to me, I make it my business to listen."

"Then I make you a gift of it. Will you use it to slay Tongue Kills?" he asked curiously as he handed it over.

Malone took the knife, admiring the way the light from the fire shone through the carefully honed edges. "Hope not. After all, y'all don't necessarily want him made dead. Just agreeable." He slid the knife into his

belt alongside its steel cousin, leaned forward.

"Now then. What makes this Tongue Kills's medicine so strong? What songs does he use? What powders? What is his animal? Badger, bear, eagle?"

Two-Feathers-Falling replied tiredly, knowing it would make no difference. "He uses no songs, no powders. He has no animal."

"Then how the devil does he make medicine?"

"With words," Two-Feathers-Falling explained. "Only with words."

Malone nodded as if this meant something, took a couple of puffs, then removed his pipe and passed it to the old chief, who inhaled experimentally.

"Good tobacco," he said as he handed the pipe back.

"Thanks," Malone told him. He grinned at Two-Feathers-Falling. "I kin tell you don't think I've much of a chance against this feller Tongue Kills, but don't count me out till you see me down. I know a few words of my own."

The sleepy Cheyenne medicine man started. For an instant the mountain man's eyes seemed to have disappeared, the whites and the dark blue to have vanished completely, leaving only dark pits beneath heavy black brows. Within those twin voids lay stars and music, tenderness and power, indifference and compassion. Wide awake, Two-Feathers-Falling blinked.

But there was only a very large white man sitting there opposite him, with real eyes. A trick of the fire, he decided.

"What do you think?" asked Grass-in-Hair the next morning as they watched the white man ride westward out of camp. "Of course he must be as mad as the other white men say, else he would not try this for us. But that is not necessarily a bad thing."

Two-Feathers-Falling held his buffalo robe snug against his body. Though it was warming up as the sun rose, stars still lingered in the blueing sky, pieces of ice the morning was slow to melt. "I think you have lost a good knife," he muttered as he shuffled off in the direction of his tepee.

**I**T TRULY was beautiful country, Malone mused as he nudged Worthless to his right. Green and heavily forested. While his mount could usually be left to his own devices to find the easiest path down a slope, sometimes his bad right eye played him false, and Malone

had to help out.

Plenty of forage, good water. Excellent country. Elk and deer in abundance, and a host of lesser animals. Grizzlies, too, of course, but they didn't bother Malone. Those possessed of cantankerous disposition usually sought alternate routes as soon as they set eyes on him.

He settled in by the side of a meandering stream lined with new spring growth. There were trees nearby from which he'd soon raised a fine lean-to against a smooth outcropping of granite. Upstream he found beaver and remarked the location for future visitation.

He was preparing to put a door on the lean-to one afternoon, when he heard footsteps approaching. He tensed as he turned, alert but in no way particularly concerned. His rifle lay close at hand, within convenient reach. In wild country a man always kept his rifle closer to him than anything else, including his woman.

His visitor's attire was simple and traditional, except perhaps for his unusual breastplate that was decorated with feathers from a bird Malone couldn't identify. They were orange tending to yellow at the tips. The man wore much red paint on his face and clothing. His braids were long and, despite his apparent age, black as soot. He carried no weapons. Worthless spared him a glance, snorted, and returned to cropping the fresh new grass behind the lean-to.

The visitor was shorter than Malone, but then so was most of the human race. He stopped to study the mountain man. Malone waited for a while, then shrugged and returned to his work.

As the day wore on, the visitor maintained his silent inspection, eventually taking a seat on a small rock that protruded from the bank of the stream. Malone finished the door, peeled two large poles, and used them to brace the roof by jamming them into holes he'd dug earlier. Then he fished three good-sized trout from the stream, gutted and filleted them, and set about building a cookfire. Not one word had passed between the two men.

When evening arrived, Malone put the spitted fish on the fire, crossed his legs, and sat down to wait for them to cook. "For someone who's supposed to be master of a lot o' words, you're downright stingy with 'em, friend."

"You know who I am." Tongue Kills did not have a voice. He was possessed of an instrument, nay, an entire orchestra. Strings and brass,

woodwinds and percussion, all were present and active, vibrating and resonant within his throat. Each word that fell from his lips was of itself a self-contained speech, a declamation, an oration of conciseness and import admirable. It was a thing wondrous and beautiful to behold.

"Then you must know, white man, that you are a trespasser on my land."

Malone gestured expansively. "Plenty o' land here. Why are you so reluctant to share it?"

Tongue Kills sat a little straighter. "It is my wish. I have taken this place for my own."

"Your brothers think you greedy."

"They are not my brothers, and I do not care what they think. I do not care what you think. Like them, you must leave."

Malone arched his back, stretching. "Shucks, I was jest gettin' comfortable here. Reckon I might stay awhile."

Tongue Kills leaned forward. Light danced in his eyes like individual flames skating on sheets of mica. "I say that you will leave. If you try to stay, I will make it bad for you."

"With what? Some words? Mister, I've been around. I've seen a lot and heard a lot. Why, you're lookin' at the original lover o' words. I know all the words of my own people, as well as those of the Crow and Shoshone. Not to mention the Assiniboin and Kwakiutl, the Zuni and Arapaho, the Choctaw and the Seminole and Sioux. I know words in languages you ain't never heard of; Chinnee and Nippon, Tamil and Urdu, Basque and Romany and Pidgin. I know words in languages that was, like Assyrian and Maya, and words in languages that ain't yet, like Swahili and Hip-Hop.

"Better to share the plenty you got with your fellows. That's the proper way for one to live."

Tongue Kills smiled unpleasantly. "You speak of many strange things, but I see no signs of power. It matters not the kind of words, but how they are used. I, too, know of other languages and other words. I have made the knowing of them my hobby." His tone deepened ever so slightly. "You do not want to know of them, white man."

Malone plucked a sprig of grass between thumb and forefinger and stuck it between his teeth.

"Shoot, I'm always willin' to learn. And since I ain't goin' nowhere, why don't you take the time to enlighten me?"

Tongue Kills's expression darkened. He nodded once, cleared his throat with a rumble, then spoke afresh. That extraordinary booming, reverberant voice spoke out, rustling the grass, its tone and emphasis sending birds fleeing from their nests, and insects rushing to burrow deeper into the ground, as the ominous speaker dropped one turbid obloquy after another into the previously calm pool of reality.

"Man, your spirit cannot escape the cradle of dung in which it was originally nurtured, a place shunned by the lowest living things, a birthplace so vile it is avoided even by the beetles that seek to feed in such holes. The odor of the misbegotten clings to you and can never be washed off, so that the stink of your ever-putrefying soul turns others from you no matter whither you may seek to flee."

As Tongue Kills spoke, Malone felt himself growing distinctly hot under the collar, and, somewhat surprisingly, not only there. Looking down, he saw that the fringe of his deerskin leggings was beginning to curl slightly at the tips. Wisps of smoke emerged from several as if they were not strips of cured leather, but rather, thick, sweat-sodden matches. He began to perspire, and, despite the chill of approaching evening, experienced an unexpected desire to be rid of attire become suddenly suffocatingly warm. It was clear that Tongue Kills played for keeps.

Not that Malone was about to take those words lying down, or even standing up. He'd picked up a turn of phrase or two in his travels, damned if he hadn't; the rapierlike accusations of cotton auctioneers in Savannah, the seasoned dressing-downs of unyielding Prussian drill instructors. The lamentations of Calcut merchants and the withering complaints of the camel traders of old Araby. Lisboa's fisherwomen had shared their best and most scatological insults with him, and once, severely in need of a trim, he'd had his scalp professionally singed by the singsong calumnies of a famed Canton trader in opium.

Why, subsequent to one pleasant evening's drinking and concomitant commentary on Washington politics, none other than Dan'l Webster himself had ventured admiringly that, when properly inspired, Amos Malone's palate was truly an anvil of imprecations on which the mountain man's tongue could hammer out insult after admirable insult, a river of inventive invective as grandiosely appalling as New York City's sewer system after a major summer storm.

"I might tolerate that," he replied carefully, "if it didn't come from



someone so ugly that mere sight of 'im would shock the feathers off a constipated buzzard, the taste of whom would induce in a flock o' starvin' mosquitoes permanent indigestion soon as they discovered that their quarry had urine for blood. Why, your countenance'd drive a dozen o' the world's homeliest women to sworn celibacy an' turn the Medusa herself to stone."

As he listened to this, Tongue Kills's expression did indeed begin to harden, if not actually to fossilize. His skin began to redden noticeably, until, in the gathering darkness, he was actually glowing slightly. Currents of agitated air streamed upward from his head and shoulders, like heat waves rising from a paved road on a blistering July noon.

"Your mother," the medicine man retorted, his voice crackling like a new-set bonfire of Georgia fatwood, "must have mated with a snail, for it is clear that slime was the sole offspring of that union. You reek of man's civilization, of noxious hypocrisy and embalming greed, of the air you have infected and the water you have poisoned. The soil itself recoils from beneath your feet, and the air screams as it is tortured by your lungs. The fecal matter that emerges from your body is the only pure thing you give back to the suffering earth, on which you are the foulest of parasites, in which even other parasites refuse to dwell."

Malone was forced to remove his heavy jacket, from which dense smoke was beginning to billow. He threw it down and began jumping madly on it to stomp out the flames that were trying to spurt from the sleeves. His exposed forearms, big around as aspen trunks, began to blister, and the sweat pouring from his forehead threatened to blind him. Even his teeth felt hot.

But he who listens learns. It struck Malone as more than slightly significant that Tongue Kills had spoken not of white man's civilizations but of man's. As they continued to trade dysphemisms of greater and greater heat, it set him to wondering as to just exactly whom he might be contending with by the shore of the wandering stream.

Not only the palaverers, but the atmosphere surrounding them, grew hotter, as their calefacting conversation sent the very molecules of the air into an agitated frenzy. They tried to flee, crashing into one another and raising the temperature near the campsite to near tropical levels. Malone's overheated pants and leggings joined his well-pounded jacket underfoot as he was forced to expand the range of his frantic dance. Even the mountain

man's hair was beginning to sizzle.

Meanwhile, Tongue Kills's smile grew forced, and though he did not give off any smoke, he looked more than a mite disconcerted. Heat continued to pour off him in waves, and he glowed like the big lantern that hung outside the Three Whalers' Tavern in Boston's High Street.

When an uneasy Worthless whinnied, Malone realized he'd better do something quick. A mere glance from his mount was suggestive of something seriously askew, but when he whinnied, it was time for a man to give serious consideration to proximate possibilities. It meant ordinary folk had better clear out fast, and the commonly fearful seek cover.

From the beginning, there had been a glow in Tongue Kills's eyes; a particular glow that made Malone suddenly squint with recognition. He realized that he'd seen that exact thing before, in another place, far off in the southern seas. It wasn't a glow that belonged in a man's eyes, which led him to a corollary that was as revelatory as it was inescapable.

"You win," he gasped, his throat scalded, the skin on the back of his neck beginning to curl from the heat. "I can't match you fury for fury, hot word for hot word. You've beat me."

Tongue Kills's triumphant expression twisted into a sneer. "It is good that you realize this, but it will not save you. I warned you, and you did not heed, but chose instead to challenge. You will die, as will all who try to come to this place."

Malone was down to his long johns now, and only the fact that they hadn't had any contact with soap or water for an inexcusable length of time kept him from being spontaneously combusted right then and there by Tongue Kills's unceasing cataract of execration.

"What'll happen to me, I don't know, but there's just one thing more I have to say about you," he rasped out. "It's a darn shame that your mastery of heated language happens to be inversely proportional to your humanity."

Tongue Kills gave a start, then a cry of outraged realization as the paradox wrapped him in its inescapable grip. His fury imploded, inescapably self-contained. Malone shielded his face with an arm as heat, the by-product of all that anger, rushed outward in waves from his antagonist. Frustration, volatile as black powder, erupted. Somewhere behind him, Worthless was whinnying loudly while trying to simultaneously keep all four feet off ground grown suddenly intolerably warm.

"You vile apparition, you imposition that walks on two legs; your

existence outrages the world!"

"Yeah, well," bellowed Malone in response as he continued to shield his face, "you ain't no rose o' creation yourself!"

Tongue Kills's skin began to ripple and run like taffy, his flesh to sag. Malone had been witness to that phenomenon before, too, in the same places where he had seen the unholy glow, both in the Sandwich Islands and in the still-farther-distant Land of the Long White Cloud.

Even as he continued to shower fulminations upon the mountain man, Tongue Kills was melting, unable to deny the uncontrollable fury and anger that was reducing him to his natural state. The vibrant red and orange and yellow of him spread out upon the ground, racing to take possession of the fertile valley. Where his colors, like his words, ran hot, the ground split like stale pudding and belched forth fresh fury, the earth itself melting and bubbling, until the entire region seemed to be seething and echoing the maledictions of its master.

"Enough of words!" screamed the pillar of molten contumeliousness that had been Tongue Kills. It towered higher than the tops of the pines, bathing the lean-to in hellish yellow light, twisting like a tower of coiled sulfur. Malone prepared to defend himself against something stronger than heated language.

"That weapon will not protect you!" the quivering pillar snarled. "Nothing made of man can affect me!" A pseudopod of orange fire reached for the near-naked Malone, intent upon securing him in its grasp and crushing him to a crisp.

The mountain man crouched and parried, flicking the flaming tendril aside. A moan of frustration emerged from the unstable column. Its cohesion spent, it promptly began to shrink and collapse in upon itself.

Somehow Malone's own voice carried above the dispersing hell that confronted him. He gripped the knife tightly. "This here blade's good traditional obsidian, and it ain't of man. It's of you."

"Excretion of carbon!" the disintegrating pillar shrieked. "Boil upon the earth's buttocks! You *cannot* take this place for your own. You cannot drive me from it. Here I have been, and here I will remain, to shout the words that will keep you from this place! Where I am now, no grass shall grow, no animals live! The land will be denied you, and the very water itself I will season so sharply that it kills! I will remain forever, deny burbleiss shussh . . .!"

Tongue Kills continued his epithetic diatribe without pause, but having been reduced by Malone's carefully applied paradox to his true self, he could speak now only in the language of the earth from which he'd sprung. Malone could comprehend that speech as few others could, but protected himself from it not with magic, but by the simple expedient of stuffing his ears with bits of duck down extracted from his bedroll. As Malone gathered up his scorched but still-intact clothing, Tongue Kills continued to rage all around him. He had indeed managed to render much of the fertile region useless, but had also been compelled to leave many places untouched. Malone had neither triumphed nor been defeated. He had half-won, and was lucky to have managed that.

Only when they were well clear of the valley and beyond earshot of Tongue Kills's pursuing screams did man and mount pause gratefully at a clean, untrammelled pool to cool their blistered feet. Thus assuaged, a chastened but relatively pleased Malone sought additional absolution in the mountain man's ultimate sacrifice. He undertook to have a bath.

"*Ah-weh*," muttered Grass-in-Hair understandingly. "It is no wonder, then, none could outtalk him, for he was not a man but a spirit." The chief frowned slightly. "What happened to your face?"

Malone gingerly felt of his scorched pinnacle of a proboscis. "As it progressed, our exchange grew heated. In my face, you see the result."

"You say he is still there?" Two-Feathers-Falling said uncertainly.

Malone nodded. "Still there, still a-screamin' and a-hollerin'. But the words he shouts now can't hurt y'all because you won't understand 'em proper, unless you get too close to him. So stay clear o' the places where he's doin' his insultin' and complainin', and you'll be O.K. There's still plenty o'game about, and water he ain't poisoned with his anger."

Grass-in-Hair replied thankfully. "You have helped us much, and we are grateful. We will move camp in three days."

"Suit yourselves. Me, I think I'm gonna head on south. Friend o' mine name o' Bridger supposed to be around. Seen all o' this Yellowstone country I want to for a spell." He leaned back against a heaping pile of buffalo robes.

"I mean it, though, when I say you need to keep your kinfolks away from the places Tongue Kills has kept for himself. His words may not be able to hurt you no more, but be damned if he can't still spit."

*"Angelman" marks Jessie Thompson's second appearance in F&SF. This piece requires a bit of concentration, to find the heart in its delicate craftsmanship but it will reward your effort.*

# Angelman

**By Jessie Thompson**

**W**HEN ANGEL flies, I shudder. Where he gets his energy, I don't know. He swings through the trees like a monkey on speed. "Where there's a will, there's a way," he singsongs down at me, grinning as he drops from a thick green vine. His scrawny, sweaty body bounces in front of my closed eyes. His voice rakes my mind. "You're lucky I found you, Barney boy." I'm not so sure.

My cat is asleep. The whiskers on one side of her fuzzy face are invisible, crushed against the bed. The whiskers sprouting from her other cheek look like the bristles on an old shaving brush, but her paw pads are so pink you could believe in magic if you stared long enough. I can't. Angel doesn't let me. He's jabbering, wanting us to make some plans. I can't concentrate on what he's saying. It bothers me that I might have

killed two people yesterday.

When Angel tells me what to do, I shiver. Last night he told me to drive down to Copymat, park in back, steal that spiky machine that punches holes for spiral bindings, and hide it under my bed. "You're nuts!" I said. "What do I need to do that for?" But Angel just grinned and said do it, so I went down there and ducked into the storeroom. When everyone was gone, I crept out, grabbed the hole punch off the counter, smashed the glass door, and ran for it. Two men had me up against my car before I could say Jesus. I had to use my knife. Angel doesn't care. He likes it when I hurt people. It makes him happy. It makes him feel alive.

Angel says I've got to do something so exciting that, just once, for one long moment, he forgets he's dead. That's all, he says. That's all he wants. And then he'll leave me alone forever.

There's this girl I like. She kissed me once, but she won't see me anymore. I scare her, she says. It breaks my heart. Angel told me to follow her around and spy on her, but I said no. He got mad and said I couldn't think about her anymore. I can't even think about her at night, in the privacy of my own bed, because Angel keeps me awake, jabbering, telling me what crazy damn thing he wants me to do next.

Angel can't do anything without my help. He lost his body in Vietnam. Now I am Angel's arms and legs, and he hangs out in my brain and tells me what to do. I guess I should be happy to help. But I get so tired of him.

He hangs from a gnarled vine and breathes stinky air right in my face, peering at me and blinking real fast as he jabbars orders, like he can't see me, like he's blinking back tears.

But he can see. Angel can see fat snakes and dead birds and fruit rotting on the floor of the jungle from the very tops of the trees as he flies through. I hate it when he slides down a vine and stuffs them into his cheeks, swallowing chunks until he barfs.

I asked him once why he doesn't eat something that won't make him puke. He said everything makes him puke, and he shouldn't even be eating, because when you're dead, your digestive system doesn't work properly. Angel has a sick sense of humor. But then he gets serious and says he just can't stop. Tasting something makes him feel alive in himself,

not just through me.

I THOUGHT ABOUT telling my mother about Angel. But I know what she'd say. "You're special, Barney. I always told you that."

Angel says that you can be anything you want to be, if you try hard enough. Mostly I want to be dead, which is ironic, because Angel wants so badly to be alive.

Tonight he told me to steal a Porsche in Mill Valley. We're racing down Mount Tam like maniacs, swinging all over the curves. My belly flops as I screech around the turn by the Mountain House. My jeans are warm and soaked. I piss them a lot when I'm out doing these crazy things for Angel. You'd think my mother would say something. She never says a word.

We're deep in some redwoods now. The Porsche's silver hood shimmers in the jagged moonlight. I've got the windows down. The wind is rushing in, pouring into my ears, buzzing my brain. Angel makes me yank the wheel again and again to feel how fast the car recovers. The wind rips at my heart. I'm getting little flashes of an old memory: my dad, driving stinky drunk down the coastal highway in the dark, my mom sitting next to him, radiating anxiety at infrared frequency. I'm too little to see over the back of the Buick's bench seat. If they both suddenly disappeared, how fast would I notice? Could I grab the wheel? At least Angel isn't invisible.

He gets bored and tells me to goose it through Mill Valley. House lights wink and flash through the trees like cherry bombs. I pick up a train of squad cars as I slam through town. The cops are howling and nipping at my wheels. Angel loves it. We burst out of the woods and climb sharp, bare hills, heading for the beach.

Suddenly there's a cow in the road, stuck in a cattle guard. Her brown eyes bulge with panic. She howls. Angel shouts. I lose control, sending us rocking and jolting over rough pasture toward black sky and the roaring hiss of the sea. My shoulder slams against the door as I yank the latch, tumble out, and let the Porsche fly over the edge. A cop car goes squealing after it, down into the dark salt spray. I'm rolling down a scratchy hillside,

dizzy as hell, and Angel's laughing, he's so jazzed. When I get snagged on some barbed wire and squash a big, fat cow pie with my face, he cracks up all over the place.

Swearing, I scramble to my feet and run downhill, cutting into the trees so the cops won't see me. I'm a sweaty, shitty mess. I've got to steal another car to get home. I can't fly like Angel can.

My mom is waiting up for me, and when she sees how dirty I am, she gives me a bath and puts me in fresh pajamas. The feel of the warm, soft cloth makes my cock hard, and she shakes her head and says, "tsk tsk," with a little grin. She leaves my room and comes back with a Barbie doll dressed in lingerie and a Ken doll dressed in tennis clothes and starts lecturing me about sex. This is my mother's favorite game. But Angel won't let me play. My mother wheedles and pouts, then gives up and goes to bed.

My cat keeps twisting and turning on the blankets. I rub her belly. It feels so good I slide my cock down her soft fur. Angel tells me to stop. I tell him to go to hell. I'm still mad about the long walk home. I had to walk. I couldn't steal a car because Angel wouldn't tell me to — I don't do stuff like that on my own.

I reach down and touch myself softly. Angel stops swinging and stares at me. I stare back. "You touch me, then," I say.

"You're nuts!" he croaks.

"Then leave me alone!" I go back to my business.

Angel's yanking down vines and bouncing off trees, screaming that I'm gonna burn in hell. I get a shiver of excitement. I didn't know I could do this to him. The shiver makes me harder. It feels so good when I slip my hand over and start pumping. Angel's eyes bulge and turn red. I can't hear what he shouts 'cuz I'm panting so loud. I won't stop. Goddamn it, I won't. Suddenly I explode, and Angel's got flaming white goo on him. He's running through the jungle, screaming, burning, rubbing his face, making it worse. I'm laughing, when my mom throws open the door and asks why I'm screaming. "Angel, baby," she says, "what's the matter?"

I leap out of bed and smash her jaw. She crumples in a hot heap. My cat jumps off the bed. I'm panting, dizzy, burning up. My cat starts licking her face. I'm alone. I can't see Angel anywhere. I should call an ambulance for my mother. I should try to find Angel. But what I really want to do is go down to Solano Avenue and eat Chinese food. I step out the door, and the night is cool, and now I can fly.



For much of her career, Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow has written about vampires. Her most famous vampire, the Count Saint-Germain, has been the protagonist of a number of novels and a handful of short stories.

In this, her first tale for F&SF, Quinn also writes about vampires. But the inspiration for this story did not involve Saint-Germain. "Most of the time I don't know where the stories begin, but this is one of the few where I do," Quinn writes. "Steve King said shortly after Salem's Lot that he thought it would be possible for an isolated community to vanish without anyone noticing. That got me to thinking. Maybe the phone company wouldn't notice, maybe the public utilities wouldn't notice, maybe the Board of Education wouldn't notice, but I can think of one group who would. From that beginning came this affectionate solution to Steve's problem — after all, it takes one bloodsucker to know another, right?"

# INVESTIGATING JERICHO

**By Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow**

PAPER ROLLED FROM the printer in waves, and Morton Symes gathered it up from the floor, scowling at the columns of figures printed there. It was exactly what he had feared. He dragged the material back to his office and began to separate the pages and arrange them.

William Brewster was waiting impatiently when Morton finally came into his office. He wasted no time with polite trivia. "Well?"

"I think it's a taxpayers' revolt, sir," said Morton, holding out his newly assembled file. "According to our records, no one in Jericho has filed income tax returns for the past two years. No one."

"Jericho," said Brewster, his eyes growing narrow behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "Where is this place?"

"North of Colebrook, in New Hampshire. Near the Canadian border." He held out a photocopy of a Rand McNally map. "I've marked it for you in red."

"Is that a joke?" Brewster asked suspiciously.

"No," Morton said, horrified. "No, sir. Not at all."

Brewster nodded, satisfied; then he said, "It might have been a good one, though."

"Thank you, sir," Morton said promptly. He stood more or less at attention while Brewster opened the file and scanned through it, pausing from time to time to click his tongue.

"Not a very big place by the look of it," said Brewster as he put the file down some twenty minutes later.

"Population: 2,579," Morton said. "As of two years ago."

"When they stopped paying taxes," Brewster said with that cold disapproval that made his whim law in the office.

"Well, you see," Morton pointed out as diplomatically as possible, "last year there were still a few paying taxes, a few. For the last taxable year, not one citizen sent in W-2's or anything else. Not even those entitled to refunds filed. It has to be a taxpayers' revolt." He waited while Brewster considered the information.

"I wonder why it took so long to find it?" Brewster mused, his expression suggesting that anyone lax enough to have let this pass might expect a very unpleasant interview.

"Well, it took awhile for the random sampling to catch up with a place that small. With nine states filing in our office, the computer has an enormous number of returns to deal with. And tax reform made it all so complicated. . . ." He smiled miserably. "I guess we weren't looking as closely as we should have. There were other things on our minds." It took the greatest self-control for him not to twiddle the ends of his tie.

"It's very small; as you say, it wouldn't turn up quickly in a random comparison." Brewster was letting him and the rest of the office off the hook, and his expression said he knew it. "So. What are your plans?"

This time, Morton did pull his tie, but just once. "I thought . . . I thought I ought to go look around, investigate the situation, see what's happening up there." When he received no response from Brewster, he opened the file and indicated one set of figures. "You see? There's a small lumber mill that provides employment for over two hundred men and

about a dozen women; none of them have filed, and neither has the lumber mill. It might mean that the mill has shut down, in which case there could be a minor recession in the town. I have to check the courts to find out if there's been a bankruptcy hearing on the mill. And the other large income is from the Jericho Inn, which specializes in sportsmen. There is no indication that it's still in operation, so I thought . . . well, it might make sense to go there and see for myself. . . ."

Brewster glowered as Morton's words faded. "How long were you planning to be away?"

"I don't know; a week, maybe two, if the situation warrants the time." He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Brewster always made him feel about eight years old.

"What would make the situation warrant it?" Brewster asked sharply.

"If the town turns out to be prosperous and is actively refusing to cooperate with us, then I might not need as much as a week; a few days ought to be enough to get a full report. But if the town is having trouble with unemployment, then I might have to stick around, to see how deep the rot goes." He could not read the cold look in Brewster's magnified eyes. "We're supposed to be compassionate, aren't we, sir? Not make snap judgments or arbitrary rulings? With the reform and all the changes, we were told to be understanding, weren't we? If the town's out of money, it could account for what they've done."

"It might," Brewster allowed. He leaned back and regarded Morton down the length of his long Roman nose, a maneuver calculated to be intimidating. "Why should I send you? Why not Callisher or Brody?"

"Well, I found it, sir," said Morton, as if he were about to lose a favorite toy.

Brewster nodded once, but returned to the same dominating pose. "That you did. That you did." He drummed long, thick fingers on the immaculate surface of his desk. "That's a point." His next question was so unexpected that Morton was shocked almost to silence. "Where do you come from?"

"I live in Pittsford, just south of —," Morton began.

"I know where you live," said Brewster in his best condescending manner. "Where do you come from?"

"Oh." Morton was afraid he was blushing. "I come from Portland. In Michigan. Between Grand Rapids and Lansing." He was afraid that if he

said anything more, he would stutter.

"Family still there?" Brewster inquired.

"Dad's in Chicago; Mom's dead; my older sister lives in Montana, running some kind of tourist ranch — I forget what you call them —"

"Dude ranches," Brewster supplied.

Morton bobbed his head up and down several times. "Yeah. That's it. She works there. My younger sister is married to a colonel in the army. They're stationed in Texas. They were in Europe." He did his best to look confident. "No family in New England anywhere that I know of."

Brewster straightened up. "That's something." He looked down at the file once more, thumbing his way through the printouts. "I'll authorize you to travel for a maximum of ten days. I expect a phone report every two days, backed up by a written report when you complete the investigation." He handed the file back to Morton. "You better come up with something. We don't want the evening news saying the IRS is persecuting innocent citizens. Best go over that village name by name."

"Of course," Morton assured him, doing his best to contain the panic he felt. "I'll be very careful, Mr. Brewster," he vowed, his ordinary face taking on as much purpose as it could. "I'll report each day if you like. Tell me when you want me to call."

"Midafternoon should do," Brewster said, suddenly sounding very bored.

"Midafternoon, every day," said Morton.

"Every other day," corrected Brewster. "If I'm not available, my secretary will record your report, and I'll review it later. I expect to have numbers where I can reach you while you're gone."

"Certainly. Of course," said Morton, daring to give the hint of a smile.

Brewster made sure that did not last. "I expect you to have an evaluation for me within the first twenty-four hours as to the general economic condition of the community and some observations on the political disposition of the citizens." He indicated the file. "You don't want to end up on Dan Rather's bad side, do you?" He made it very plain that if anything went wrong, Morton would take all the heat himself.

"No," said Morton, blanching.

"Keep that in mind, and you should do well," said Brewster as he leaned forward. "Be astute, Symes."

Morton had never been admonished to be astute before, and did not

quite know what would be an appropriate response. "I'll do what I can, sir." He wanted to make his escape while Brewster still seemed disposed to give it to him.

"Carry on, Symes," said Brewster, and at once ignored Morton, not so much as if he had left the room, but as if he had disappeared altogether.

Northern New Hampshire was quite beautiful, the worn mountains dozing in the early-autumn afternoon, their trees still green, though no longer the deep, heady color of summer. The drive was so pleasant that Morton Symes castigated himself for lack of purpose as he drove northward, into increasingly remote regions, his chocolate-colored BMW humming efficiently, the tape deck playing some of Symes's favorite soft-rock hits. The one delay, caused by a road-repair crew blocking traffic for the better part of forty minutes, brought Morton to North Poindexter, near Colebrook, at sunset. He flipped a mental coin and elected to find a motel for the night rather than press on to Jericho.

"Just the one night?" asked the clerk in the insufferably quaint inn Morton found off the main street.

"Just the one."

"On your way to the lakes?" asked the clerk, making small talk while Morton filled out the necessary forms.

"No; Jericho." Morton looked at him over the rims of his glasses, a move he thought might discourage conversation.

"Jericho?" said the clerk in some surprise. "Why there?"

"Business," said Morton, even more tersely.

"In Jericho?" The clerk laughed once in disbelief.

"Why not in Jericho?" asked Morton, in spite of himself.

The clerk hesitated a bit longer than he should have. "Oh, nothing. Just don't get many . . . flatlanders going there; that's all. People from North Poindexter don't go there." He handed a key to Morton. "Second door on the left, at the end of the walkway."

"Thanks," Morton said automatically as he took the key. He was about to pick up his suitcase, when he could not resist asking, "Why don't people from here go to Jericho?"

This time the clerk considered his answer very carefully. "Not that kind of place," he said, and turned away, unwilling to say anything more.

Morton pondered over what the clerk had said, and decided that he

might have been right in his assumption that the town was in some form of depression. If it had little tourist trade and the lumber mill was not doing well, it could be that the whole village was hanging on by the proverbial shoestring. He made his first, meticulous notes, with records of mileage and amounts spent on fuel and food, then went to the most promising restaurant in town, certain that he was off to a good start.

Over baked chicken in the North Poindexter restaurant, he decided that he would do his best to be helpful to the people of Jericho. If, like their biblical namesake, their walls were "tumblin' down," he would offer to help the citizens shore them back up. He remembered the seminar he had attended three months ago, a seminar that stressed learning to relate to the problems of the taxpayer and to be compassionate and sympathetic in regard to their needs and their problems. He rehearsed in his head the right way to say things, so that he would not sound too much like a cop or an inquisitor.

MORNING FOUND him out of North Poindexter and on the road to Jericho by nine. He had taken great care to dress less formally than usual, in a tweed jacket and gray slacks instead of his usual three-piece suit. One of the things he had learned in the seminar was that most people found casual attire less intimidating, and Morton did not want to get off to a bad start with the citizens of Jericho. He listened to light classics — they seemed more appropriate to this warm, windy day — and admired the scenery. In another month, with the trees in their autumnal glory, the drive would be spectacular; now it was pleasant, even refreshing. Morton made a mental note to take a few pictures before he left, so that he could recapture his sense of enjoyment, which led him to think about his destination. A remote village like Jericho might easily become his secret vacation haunt, where he could spend a few days away from the pressure of his work in an unspoiled place. He permitted himself a flight of fancy: his work with the townspeople had earned him their respect and possibly the affection of some, and he was regarded as their welcome outsider on his annual returns. Returns. He chuckled at his own mental pun. Then he concentrated on his driving and the road, making special note of the few buildings he saw at a distance, and then the ones that were nearer.

Two tall Victorian atrocities at the bend of the road were Morton's

first sight of Jericho. The houses were run-down, with peeling paint and broken windows, but even in their heydays, neither would have been a sterling example of the carpenter Gothic style, in large part because both were so overdone, with turrets and cupolas and widow's walks and piazzas and fan windows in such frenzied abundance that the basic lines of the houses themselves seemed to be lost behind it all. Morton slowed as he went past the houses, and fancied that they were leaning together, whispering — two ancient crones bedecked in elaborate gowns no longer in fashion. He chided himself for his overactive imagination as he slowed the car just as the rest of the town came into view.

The main street was predominantly nineteenth century, but with a few older buildings at the far end of the town. Two churches, both austere white buildings, one with a spire and one with a turret, were on opposite sides of and opposite ends of the street; the older of the two — with the turret at the far end on the left — had been unpainted so long that the wood beneath had weathered to a scaled gray. Next to that church was a Federal-style building with an ancient and faded sign that proclaimed it the Jericho Inn. Between Morton and the Inn were a town hall; a single-story building with an imposing Victorian facade (Morton learned later that it was the bank); a 1930s-vintage post office; a café of sorts, in a building that had once been a private home and was now given over to offices; a small, neglected park; a barnlike building advertising feed, fuel, and ice; a hardware store with a display of plumbing tools and supplies in the window; two small wooden houses, both dating from about 1850, one with a sign tacked by the door saying, "Knitting and Sewing: reasonable rates"; and a more recent house with an Art nouveau stained-glass window over the front door; then a fifties ranch-style house, hideously out-of-place. Opposite that house was the steepled church; and next to it, an open block overgrown with weeds, identified as the "Jericho Park" by a sign near a rusty children's playground that ended at a fenced schoolyard; next to that, opposite the two houses, was a medium-sized grocery store, its windows dusty and its doors closed; beyond the store was another house that had been converted to office space that advertised the services of John H. Lawler, accountant; then a more recent building, in the concrete-slab style, with "Jericho Lumber Company" over the entrance; across from the post office was the Wallace's Department Store, its window displays at least two years out-of-date, the mannequins looking

like escapees from a 1940s *film noir*; after that two small shops, one selling candy, the other a bookstore; then a box of a building, opposite the town hall, which housed the two-man police force and the three-cell jail; the place across from the Jericho Inn was much larger, the whole of a block and a half given over to the gardens — now in riotous ruin — of a grotesque mansion, which had started out Federal and had been added to in two distinct layers of Victoriana. Along the street, there were five different vehicles parked: a twenty-year-old Chevy pickup by the hardware store, a muddy Edsel in front of the post office, a four-year-old Cadillac across from the bank, a step van by the department store, and a cherry 1956 Thunderbird sports car by the park.

Morton stared at the town, noting that most of the secondary streets were filled with single- and two-family residences, and that no one seemed to be up and about, though the morning was closer to lunch than breakfast. He started down the main street, looking for signs of life.

In the distance a school bell rang, but there was no change apparent on the street.

After a brief period of consideration, Morton pulled in across the street from the town mansion and settled down to watch Jericho, wondering why the school bell seemed to attract no response other than the occasional answer of hoots from the volunteer fire department, a block and a half away.

An hour passed; two. Morton was hard put to keep his eyes open, or to pay attention to the main street, and when he did, he could detect no change. No wonder the town was depressed; no one appeared to work in it. In fact, no one seemed to live in it. Over his greatest determination, Morton began to doze.

He was awakened at sunset by a tap on his window and a face all but pressed against the glass. He straightened up and adjusted his glasses, trying not to appear startled.

"Something the matter?" asked the uniformed cop as Morton rolled down the window.

"No," said Morton at once, adding, "sir," as an afterthought. "The afternoon. . . . I got drowsy."

"It happens," said the cop, standing up. "You're new in town."

"Yes," said Morton, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. He opened it to show his IRS identification and his driver's license. "Morton Symes."



The policeman inspected these two documents narrowly, then gave a grudging nod. "It appears you are."

"And you?"

"Wilson, Dexter Wilson," he said, not offering his hand. "You passing through or staying?"

This was not a very promising beginning, but Morton was not deterred. "I have some business to do here."

"Uh-huh." Wilson rocked back on his heels. "Well, lots of luck with it." He made a gesture that was not quite a salute, and then ambled away.

Watching him go, Morton noticed that there were a few other people on the street, strolling in the last fading light of day. They moved silently, in pairs or singly, making no effort to stop for conversation. When they met, there was scarcely so much as a nod exchanged, and never did anyone hail one of the others moving along the sidewalk. This puzzled Morton, though he supposed that people living together in the same small town might not have much to say to each other after a time. There was also the taciturn nature of New Englanders, he reminded himself, their disinclination to small talk. He rolled up his window and locked the passenger door before he got out of the car.

There was no one at the reception desk in the Jericho Inn, which had the same dusty look of neglect as the rest of the town. Morton hesitated, then gave his attention to the large, old-fashioned register, noticing that the most recent guest had stopped there fourteen months ago. He frowned, then took a pen and added his own name, address, and occupation to the required lines. Assuming the Inn had no guests at the moment, he wondered if it would be proper simply to inspect the rooms and choose the one he liked best. He was weighing the possibilities, when he heard a voice rusty with disuse behind him.

"Get anything for you?"

Morton turned and saw a man in late middle years, rather scrawny and rumpled, standing in the door to the dining room.

"Why, yes," he said when he had recovered from the shock of being discovered. Little as he wished to admit it, the silent arrival of the man had terrified him for an instant. "I'd like a room. With a bath."

The man did not move; he regarded Morton with a measuring look. "Fixing to stay long?"

"Probably a week," said Morton.

"Not much to do around here," said the man.

"I'm here on business, not pleasure," Morton informed him. "I will need a week to complete it."

"Business?" repeated the man. "In Jericho?" He laughed unpleasantly as he shambled closer. "Don't have much fancy here," he said.

"You mean in the Inn?" Morton asked with a significant raise to one eyebrow.

"That; Jericho, too." The man was now behind the reception desk. "Might take less time than you think, your business."

"I doubt it," said Morton, determined to assert his authority and establish a more reasonable level of communication between them.

"Suit yourself. You want a room, do you?" He read the signature Morton had just put in the register. "IRS. Well, well, well."

"We have some questions about Jericho." Morton once again offered his identification. "I trust you take MasterCard."

"Cash," said the man. "Don't hold with plastic here."

Morton shook his head, uncertain if he had brought enough cash to pay for the whole week. His head ached at the thought of reviewing cash transactions with their lack of supporting paper. He wondered if the rest of the town were as unorthodox. "How much for a week?"

"Two hundred forty dollars for seven days," said the man. "No meals included. Linen changed twice a week. Coffee available in the morning upon request, two dollars extra."

Sighing, Morton drew three hundred dollars from his wallet and hoped that the remaining hundred would be sufficient. He hoped that the bank would be willing to honor one of his credit cards if none of the businesses were willing. "I'll want coffee every morning, so that means \$254; \$46 change."

"Fast with those numbers, aren't you?" The man opened a drawer under the counter and handed four worn bills to Morton.

"You want a receipt?"

Morton blinked. "Of course," he said, knowing that not getting one was inconceivable.

"Now or when you leave?"

"Now," said Morton.

The man shook his head, but brought out a receipt pad and scribbled the date and amount on it. "Need anything more than that?"

Morton grew irritated. "Please state what the money is for, including the length of the stay and morning coffee."

Grudgingly, the man did as Morton requested. He tore off the receipt and handed it to Morton. "You can have the front center room," he said, pointing toward the ceiling. "First floor. Bay window. It's the Ivy Room. All our rooms are named for plants." He handed over a key. "The hot water don't work real good."

This information, under the circumstances, did not surprise Morton. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, and picked up his suitcase. "Is there a phone in the room?"

"Pay phone's by the rest rooms. That's all we got." The man jerked his thumb toward a narrow hallway. "Down that way."

"Thanks," said Morton, aware that he was late in phoning in. Brewster would be displeased, but that could not be helped. Morton started up the stairs, watching the desk clerk covertly, noticing how pale the man was. Perhaps he was ill, which would explain his rudeness. Then the clerk returned the stare, and Morton, abashed, averted his eyes and continued to his room.

The Ivy Room had ancient wallpaper covered in ivy twines. Luckily, it was faded, or it would have been hideous; as it was, there was an air of decayed gentility about the room, and Morton, while not delighted, was not as upset as he had feared he might be. The bathroom had an old-fashioned stand sink and a legged bathtub as long and narrow and deep as a coffin. The medicine cabinet of the sink lacked a mirror, though from the look of it, there had been one some time ago. Morton set out his shaving gear and took out the mirror he always carried when he traveled. When he was satisfied with the arrangement of his things, and that the enormous towels were clean and fresh, he went back into the bedroom and set about hanging his clothes in the antique armoire that dominated one side of the room. It was too late to call Brewster now, he knew. As he sat down to make his report for the day, he did his best to suppress a twinge of guilt. The next afternoon he would explain it all to Brewster—from the pay phone.

By the time he finished his report, it was quite dark. The two forty-watt bulbs in the ceiling fixture barely got rid of the gloom, and the desk lamp was not much brighter. With concealed exasperation, Morton changed his shirt and tie in preparation for finding supper. "It is supper in

this part of the world, isn't it?" he said to the walls. Perhaps tomorrow he would also invest in some stronger light bulbs. Then he hesitated. The wiring in many of these old buildings could not take bright lights. He could get one of those battery-powered reading lights at the hardware store; that would do it.

To Morton's surprise, there were a number of people on the street when he walked out of the Inn. He noticed the same odd silence about them. He could tell they were curious about him, but no one approached him, and when he got too near any of the pedestrians, they moved away from him, avoiding him. He thought that perhaps the clerk from the Inn had mentioned his work. How sad that so many people mistrusted the IRS, Morton thought as he found a coffee shop on one of the side streets not far from the post office.

A single waitress was behind the counter, a middle-aged woman with her hair in an untidy bun. She squinted as if she needed glasses as Morton came up to the counter. "We don't have much tonight," she said, her voice unusually low and full of disturbing implications. It was a voice made of spices and madness, and it turned her from a frump to a femme fatale in disguise.

"That's fine," said Morton with his best sincere smile. "I guess the rest have eaten."

She gave him a quick look. "You might say that."

Morton was more puzzled than ever. "Well, I've heard that some of these remote towns roll the sidewalks up early. Though you have lots of people out still."

"Uh-huh," said the waitress as she got out some flatware and set it in front of him as if she were unfamiliar with the task. "It's lamb stew — that's with vegetables in the stew and biscuits with gravy on the side."

"Fine," said Morton, who hated lamb. "That's fine." He looked around for a menu to see what he might have the next day, but could find none.

The waitress saw this and said, "There's a chalkboard. Most of the time, I tell anyone who wants to know."

"I see," said Morton, baffled.

"It'll take a couple minutes." She went through the swinging doors to the kitchen, and Morton listened for conversation or the banging of pots, but there was only silence.

You know, he told himself in his best inner-jocular style, if I were more

credulous than I am, this place would be downright eerie. He looked around for a clock, and saw that the only one, on the wall over the cash register, was stopped at the improbable hour of 2:13. He was becoming more and more convinced that the economy of the town had collapsed, and that those who remained were hanging on by the slimmest of threads. Perhaps that's why I saw no one, he went on to himself. It may be that much of the town's population has moved away. It could be that many of the houses are deserted, that the offices have no one in them. He resolved to find out more in the morning.

The waitress returned with a white ironstone dish with his dinner spread over it. "Coffee?" she asked in that disturbing voice of hers as she put the plate down in front of him.

"Yes, please," said Morton, not looking directly at her. "Is there any salt?"

Once again the waitress shot him a quick dagger of a look, and then concealed it with a smile. "Sorry. We ran out."

"That's all right," said Morton, adding one more item to his mental shopping list. He took a too-hot forkful of the stew and burned the roof of his mouth with it. He tried not to look too dismayed, but he panted over the stuff until he was sure he could swallow it without disaster. It was the strangest thing, he thought, that this lamb stew should taste so . . . so characterless, more like a TV dinner that had been in the microwave than a New England supper.

MORNING BEGAN with some minion of the Inn leaving a tray with a pot of coffee, a carton of cream, and a few packets of sugar on a tray with a cup and two pieces of desiccated toast. Morton was already dressed and tying his shoes when the knock came on his door and he found this spartan fare waiting for him. Over the coffee — which was strong without being tasty — he looked through his report of the night before. The first thing on his morning agenda was a visit to the lumber mill, to find out if it was in operation at all. After that, he supposed he would have to speak with the banker, not only to learn more about the town, but to shore up his dwindling supply of cash.

The day was glary, with thin, high clouds turning the sun to a bright patch in a white sky. Morton shaded his eyes as he looked down the street

and debated whether he should drive or walk. In a town like this, he thought that walking might be the wiser choice, so that he would not appear to be as much a stranger as the townspeople seemed to think him. So he ambled along the main street toward the older church, then made a right turn along the rutted road toward the jumble of buildings that housed the mill. As he strolled toward the small parking lot, he saw there were only two cars there — an elderly Jeep and a seven-year-old Pontiac in need of new paint — and that the incinerator cone was dark. For some unknown reason, Morton began to whistle as he approached the mill.

The first place he looked was the millpond, where a couple dozen waterlogged trunks rode low. There was no one around. He went toward the nearest building, his whistling making the silence more immense. He stared at the gaping doors, standing open as if to receive the logs, but with all the machinery quiet. Morton decided not to venture inside. Still whistling, he made his way back to the parking lot, taking his notebook out of his pocket and scribbling down his impressions before they left him.

Wending his way back to the Inn, he detoured along side streets, seeing gardens run over with weeds and berry vines. Most of the houses needed paint, and a few of them had broken windows that showed no sign of patching. Just as I thought, Morton observed to himself as he continued to whistle. This town is empty. That's what happened. The mill has closed, and most of the people have moved away.

But, said another part of his mind, they have not got new jobs or addresses, and they have not filed taxes.

When Morton reached the bank, a sign in the door said: "Closed for Lunch. Open again at 1:30." Now that, Morton decided, was a real case of banker's hours. He checked his watch, and noted that he had forty-five minutes before the bank would open again. After a brief hesitation, he decided to go back to the café where he had had supper and get himself a bite of lunch; his breakfast had not been enough to sustain him for long.

To his irritated surprise, the café was closed. A hand-lettered sign in the window indicated they would be open at six. How on earth could they get by doing so little business in a town like Jericho? Shrugging, Morton started up the street to the grocery store he had seen. He would buy some sandwich makings and a little something to augment tomorrow's breakfast.

There were two clerks in the grocery store, both teenagers, both

listless, as if they had wakened less than ten minutes ago. Morton wondered if they were on some kind of drug — they moved so lethargically and could offer so little.

"The freezers are —," Morton began to the taller boy.

"Empty. Yes, sir. Power failure." He folded his arms. "There's canned stuff, and like that."

"Yes," said Morton dubiously. "And no fresh produce, I see."

"We got a couple dozen eggs," the boy offered.

"All right," said Morton, thinking he would ask the waitress to boil them for him that night. "I'll take a dozen."

"O.K." The boy moved off sluggishly, his eyes slightly unfocused.

Morton shook his head. He had always associated drug abuse with urban kids and city pressure, but of course, that was naive. In a depressed village like this one, no wonder the kids looked for solace in drugs. He supposed the cops were aware of it, but he decided he would have to remark on it in any case.

The boy returned with a carton of eggs. "They're O.K. I checked them."

"Thank you," said Morton, handing over forty dollars.

The boy stared at the money, then gave a self-conscious shrug and made change. "Oh yeah," he said with a slight laugh, which was echoed nastily by the other boy in the market.

"Is the manager in the store?" Morton asked as he took his bagged purchases.

"Yeah," said the second boy. "But he's resting."

That, Morton surmised, could mean anything. "I'd like to speak to him. If not today, then tomorrow. Will you tell him?"

"Sure," said the first boy, leaning back against the cash register as if he were exhausted.

Morton thanked them and went back to the Inn to put his meager provisions away.

It was 1:45 before the sign in the bank door was removed and someone unlocked the door. Morton, waiting impatiently across the street, hurried over and flung the door open.

The cavernous room was empty. No tellers stood at their windows; no officers sat at the desks beyond the low railing of dusty turned wood. Morton looked around in amazement. Then he called out, "Is anyone here?"

A door at the back of the room opened, creaking on its hinges. "Please come in," said the sonorous voice of a gaunt figure standing in the opening.

"You're the president of the bank?" Morton faltered, looking around him and becoming more convinced than ever that he was seeing the final death throes of Jericho.

"Yes," said the man. "Please come in."

"Thank you," Morton said, starting to sense some relief, for surely he would now have the answer to his puzzle. He hefted his case and drew out his identification and his business card. "I'm Morton Symes. I'm with the IRS, as you can see." He held his identification up so that the tall, lean man could read the documents and see the picture.

The bank president barely glanced at it. "Yes, of course. Please sit down." He directed Morton to a high wing-backed chair covered in dark green velvet that matched the (closed) draperies at the tall windows. The president took his seat in a leather-upholstered chair behind a desk that was at least two hundred years old. "Now, what is it you want here, Mr. Symes?"

"Well," Morton said, gathering his thoughts together and launching into his explanation. "We were reviewing the tax returns for this area, as we do from time to time, and it came to our attention that in the past two years, almost no one in this village has filed tax returns with the IRS. Our records show no indication of the cause, and given the economic situation in the country, there have been times that isolated communities such as this one have been subjected to more fluctuations in their fortunes than in other, more largely economically based urban areas; yet, because of the lack of information available, we were in an awkward position — don't you see? Naturally, we are curious as to the reason for your whole village not paying taxes, or even filing forms saying that they made insufficient income, and I have been sent to investigate."

"I see," said the bank president.

Morton waited for the man to go on, to extrapolate or obfuscate, but was met with silence. Awkwardly, he continued. "Since I've come here — only yesterday, I admit — I've noticed that most of the town seems . . . deserted. There don't appear to be pupils in the school —"

"The semester hasn't started yet," said the bank president smoothly.

"— and the mill has been shut down."



"Most regrettable," said the bank president.

"Is that a permanent situation, do you think?" Morton said, reaching for his notebook.

"I believe so," said the bank president, with a very smooth widening of his mouth that did not succeed as a smile.

"How unfortunate," said Morton automatically. He had listened to tales of economic disasters so often that he had become something like an undertaker offering sympathy.

"It creates problems," said the bank president.

"Too much competition from the big companies, I guess, like Georgia-Pacific." It was a safe guess, he told himself, and not bad for an off-the-cuff remark; it made him sound more knowledgeable than he actually was.

"That is a factor," said the bank president. "You understand that since this bank was founded by my family . . . oh, generations ago, and our principal is tied up in tax-free bonds, for the most part — as you undoubtedly know — we are in a position to be able to carry much of those who remain here for a considerable time more. We have an obligation to this village, and to the people in it." He gave a delicate cough. "You said almost no one has filed tax returns for the past two years. Am I the exception?"

"Uh . . . yes." Morton had not found that particular return in his first check of the town because the return was so vast and complicated that he had overlooked the Jericho address. Now he was glad he had taken the time to review. "You have more money in North Poindexter right now than you do in this town. And all over New England, for that matter. Your Boston holdings alone could finance a dozen Jerichos." He did not want to fawn or to appear unduly impressed, though he was startled by what he had discovered. "You're very well connected."

"Yes. That's what old money does for you," said the bank president. "Still, I can see you'd better have an explanation, and I'm afraid I can't offer you one right now — I have other affairs to attend to."

Morton almost said, "In an empty bank?", but held his tongue.

"If you're not busy, let me have some of your time later today. You come to my house this evening for cocktails, say, about, oh, 7:30. Just sherry or bourbon or rum," he went on. "We're not fancy in this place." He leaned back in his chair. "My wife will be delighted for your company." There was a slight change in his expression, as if he were being amused at

Morton's expense.

"Is something the matter?" Morton asked, trying to be polite, but without success.

The bank president did not answer at once. "Mrs. Wainwright is a trifle older than I am," said the bank president. "She comes from a very old and distinguished European family. You may find her reserved, what they used to call 'high in the instep.' But don't let this bother you. She's a product of her time and culture, as are we all."

"Yes, of course," said Morton. He paused. "I can obtain the necessary documents, if you insist, but if you're willing to let me examine your records while I'm here —"

The bank president — Hewlett Wainwright was his name — held up his hand. "I'm sorry, but for the sake of the depositors and their privacy and constitutional rights, I must insist that you obtain your warrants and subpoenas." This time he made no attempt at a smile. "You understand I would be lax in my duty and my responsibility if I permitted you to ransack the accounts without the required documents."

"I understand," said Morton, ducking his head. "Certainly that's the prudent thing to do. I was only thinking that with the town in such a . . . depressed state, the sooner the tax situation is cleared up, the sooner you might go about setting things right again."

"Setting things right?" asked the bank president as if Morton had suddenly started speaking in Albanian.

"You know," Morton persisted, though his ears were scarlet, "arranging for federal aid. No doubt some of your townspeople could use a little assistance, a little retrenching, some retraining, perhaps —"

"My dear Mr. Symes," said the bank president, doing his best to contain his temper. "We are not sniveling, whining creatures, to throw ourselves on the dubious mercy of the federal government. As long as I can afford it — and I have every reason to believe I will be able to afford it for some considerable time to come — I will see that Jericho is tended to. There is no reason for the government — federal, state, or any other — to intrude." He held out his hand. "Until this evening, Mr. Symes."

Not even Brewster had routed Morton so efficiently. Stammering an apology, Morton got to his feet and made his way to the door, all the while wondering what could be making such demands on the bank president in this echoing, empty building. He closed the door to the bank president's

office and all but tiptoed across the main chamber, finding its vacant teller cages almost sinister. "Don't be absurd," he whispered to himself as he reached the door.

The afternoon air was sweet, and the deserted street intrigued him. It was comforting to stroll toward the Inn, free to stop and stare when he wanted to, or to make notes without being embarrassed. He whistled a tune he had heard last week — he thought it came from *Phantom of the Opera* — and considered going to the little police station, then kept on toward the Inn. If he was going to have cocktails with Hewlett Wainwright and his wife, he wanted to be properly dressed. He also had to make his report to Brewster.

Luckily, he had change enough to place the collect call, but he had to accept the criticism of his boss in return for his taking the call. Morton opened his notebook. "Mr. Brewster," he began in his most official voice, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to reach you yesterday. Things turned out to be a little more complicated than either of us had anticipated."

"Anticipated?" Brewster repeated, some of his bluster still in his voice. "What do you mean?"

"There are . . . difficulties here." He sensed that the desk clerk was listening, but he vowed to continue no matter what. "The mill is closed, and many of the houses appear to be deserted."

"What does that have to do with the delay in your call?" Brewster demanded.

"I needed time to gather some information," said Morton, his patience all but deserting him. "I didn't want to waste your time with telling you simple descriptions. I thought you'd rather have a complete report, not a catalog of ills."

Brewster coughed once, and while not mollified, he was not as overbearing. "That was my decision to make, Symes, not yours. But if you'd had to call collect then, too, I can see why you might wait. How come you didn't use the phone credit card we issued you?"

Morton sighed. "They appear to refuse credit cards here in Jericho. That's another reason that made me assume that the town is . . . failing. They won't take checks or credit cards — nothing but cash. I'll have to get more by the end of the week, or I won't be able to get enough gas to drive out of here." He did not give Brewster time to comment, but hurried on: "I have to be prepared to work with these people on their terms, Mr.

Brewster. I don't want them to think that we have no sympathy for their plight, or that we're punitive in our methods. These people need our help, sir. They need social services and housing grants and emergency funds to keep the whole place from turning into a graveyard."

"As bad as all that?" Brewster asked, not quite bored.

"I think it could be," Morton said carefully. "With the mill closed and most of the businesses looking pretty bad. . . . I went to the grocery store, and there was no one shopping but me. I don't think they've done much to restock the shelves." He cleared his throat delicately. "You told us all last month that we need to pay attention to the economic curves in a place before dealing with the tax impact."

"So I did," said Brewster heavily, as if he now considered that a bad idea.

"And I want to be certain that we don't make a bad situation worse. There's no point in running this place into the ground if we don't have to. It's better to have them working for a little pay than on the welfare rolls, isn't it?" Morton hoped that he could find a way to gain Brewster's support. "If we can work out some kind of program for the whole town, it might mean the difference between staying afloat and going under."

"Yes, yes," said Brewster impatiently. "Well, it's something to think about, isn't it? The last thing we want is another one of those pity-the-poor-taxpayer stories on '60 Minutes.' And this is exactly the kind of situation they'd love." He paused, and Morton did not dare to interrupt. "Give it a couple of days, Symes, and call me again. Collect. I'll see that some cash is transferred to the bank for you, but you'll have to work out the vouchers when you get back, and we'll do what we can to arrange —" He stopped abruptly. "Call me day after tomorrow, at this time. And in the meantime, don't talk to anyone else about this — do you understand?"

"Yes," said Morton, anticipating that Brewster would find a way to take any credit coming from this venture for himself, and attach any blame to be had to Morton Symes. "Sure, Mr. Brewster."

"That's good," said Brewster, turning cordial. "You'll have that cash transfer tomorrow. I'll see that it's wired to the bank —"

"Pardon me, sir," Morton interrupted. "Would you make the transfer to the bank in North Poindexter? I'll drive over and pick it up; it won't take long. I don't know what kind of cash reserves are at this bank, or if there are any. And there's almost no staff."

Once more Brewster considered. "All right; North Poindexter it is. I

will tell them to expect you by noon: how's that?"

"Fine. That's great." Morton looked down at his notes. "I haven't seen many kids aside from the two clerks at the store. The school appears to be closed. I'm going to check that out tomorrow, but I'm afraid that it means several families have left town. I'll try to get some figures on that tonight."

"Do as you think best, of course," said Brewster at his smoothest.

"Yes, sir," said Morton, all but saluting. "I'd better get ready for this cocktail thing, and then try to arrange for dinner at the café. I'll call you in two days, when I know more."

"Make sure it's all in your daily reports." Brewster coughed. "Good luck, Symes."

"Thank you, sir," said Morton, and hung up as soon as he heard Brewster put down his receiver. He stood by the phone for a few minutes, curious about the innkeeper: how much had he heard, and what had he made of it? There was no way to ask him, but Morton felt he ought to try at some point to learn more about the man. As he made his way to his room, he decided he had better have a bite or two to eat before going to the Wainwright house, for drink on an empty stomach always made him giddy.

By quarter after seven, Morton was ready, his three-piece navy-blue pinstripe suit and pale blue shirt nicely set off by his discreet medallion-patterned silk tie. It would pass muster for all but the dressiest dinners in Boston and Washington, and certainly ought to do for cocktails in Jericho. He felt awkward that he had nothing to bring his hostess, but decided that on such short notice, he could be excused for not bringing flowers or candy or a bottle of French wine.

He saw there were about a dozen people on the street, including the two policemen who served the village. As he opened the gate to the once-lavish and now-neglected gardens of the Wainwright house, he noticed that several of the people on the street were watching him covertly, almost — he smiled at the image — hungrily.

Hewlett Wainwright himself opened the door. "Please come in," he said formally, standing aside for Morton. "Welcome to our home."

"Thank you," said Morton as he stepped into the dimness of the entry hall. He noticed the authentic Tiffany light fixtures and decided that the house had probably not been rewired since they were installed. No wonder the Wainwrights used low-power bulbs with them; anything

stronger would be courting fire and disaster. Still, he thought, as he made his way toward the parlor Mr. Wainwright indicated, it might be worth it; the place was positively gloomy, with all that heavy, dark wood and the low light.

"My wife will join us directly; she takes a nap in the afternoon, you know, so she will be fresh for the evening." He indicated the parlor, which was an Art Nouveau treasure. "Go on in, Mr. Symes. Make yourself comfortable."

Morton said a few words by way of thanks, and stepped into the parlor, marveling at what he saw there. By anyone's standards, every piece in the room was a valuable antique, and all kept in beautiful condition, but for a fine patina of dust, one that could not be more than one or two days old. Aside from the Tiffany lamps, there were small statues of superb design, three of them most certainly tarnished silver. As Morton stopped to look at the largest of these — two lovers with attenuated bodies entwined like vines in an arbor — he heard a step behind him.

"Ah, there you are, my dear," said Hewlett Wainwright.

The woman in the door was elegantly attired in heavy black damask silk topped with a bodice of heavy Venetian black lace. Her hair was abundant and of a glossy white, waved back from her face and caught in some sort of twist that emphasized her slender neck and high brow. Certainly she was not young, but she was magnificent enough to catch Morton's breath in his throat. She smiled faintly, her full red lips turning up; she extended her hand to be kissed, not shaken. "Welcome to our home," she said as Morton took her hand.

Though he felt incredibly awkward, Morton bent over and kissed her fingers, trying to appear more practiced at this courtesy than he was. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wainwright."

"I am Ilona," she said. "That is one of the Hungarian variants of Helen." It was an explanation she had made many times before, but she had a way of speaking that created a kind of intimacy with her guests such that each of them felt they were being offered a special secret: Morton was no exception.

"Mr. Symes is concerned for our village," Mr. Wainwright told his wife. "He is from the Internal Revenue Service. You recall my remarks earlier?"

"Oh yes," said Ilona, her dark eyes not leaving Morton's face. "Those are the tax people, aren't they?"

"Yes. They are worried because we are the only people in Jericho who still pay taxes." He went to a gorgeous cabinet opposite the fireplace. "What would you like to drink, Mr. Symes? I ought to warn you: we have no ice."

"Oh," said Morton with an effort, "whatever you recommend. I'm afraid I'm not an expert on such things." He knew he should not be staring at his hostess, but there was something about her, and it was not her elegance or her beauty — not at all faded by age — that held him fascinated.

"Ah," said Mr. Wainwright. "Well, in that case, I can recommend a Canadian whiskey; it isn't much available in this country, but, living so close to the border, from time to time I pick a bottle or two up when I'm north on business." He had taken out a large, squat glass with a hint of etching on it. "I'll pour you a little, and if you like it, I'll be happy to fill you up again." He poured out the whiskey and brought the drink to his guest. "I see you're captivated by Ilona. She is so lovely, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Morton, blushing with the admission.

"I don't blame you for staring. I remember the first time I set eyes on her, I thought I'd die if I looked away. You were very sweet to me then, my darling," Mr. Wainwright said, addressing this last to his wife.

She lifted her shoulder; on her, even so mundane an action as a shrug was graceful. "And you were sweet to me. You had such savor then."

Morton blinked at her words, startled at her choice of words. Then he recalled that English was not her first language, and he supposed he ought to expect an occasional strange turn of phrase from her. He tasted the whiskey and tried hard not to cough. "Very . . . unusual."

Hewlett Wainwright took that as a compliment. "Thank you; let me give you some more. And in a short while, I'll have Maggie bring in something to sop up the alcohol." He winked at Morton. "Nothing special, just a little cheese and some crackers, but it'll tone down the whiskey. Not that you have to worry about it tonight. The Inn's close enough, and you're not driving anywhere." He chuckled. "Enjoy our hospitality."

"What about you?" asked Morton, noticing that only he had a glass in his hand.

"Oh, Ilona never developed a taste for whiskey, and I've had to give it up." He patted his stomach. "You know how it is: after a certain age, you must watch what you eat and drink, or your system takes revenge. You wouldn't know that yet, but one day it will happen to you, too."

"I feel awkward —," Morton began, only to have Wainwright make a dismissing gesture.

"Don't bother, Mr. Symes. It's a pleasure to be able to offer you our hospitality, and it would be very disappointing if you were not pleased with what we offer." He indicated one of the rosewood chairs near the fireplace. "Sit down. Be comfortable. Ilona, persuade him for me."

Mrs. Wainwright looked directly into Morton's eyes. "Please. Sit down. Have your drink. Be comfortable."

A trifle nonplussed, Morton did as he was told, thinking that if the situation became too awkward, he could always make his excuses and leave. "Thank you."

"Now then," said Hewlett Wainwright, coming to stand in front of the hearth. "I told you I'd explain what has happened in this village to account for our change of fortune here. I imagine your superiors are going to wonder about it, no matter what you do here. In a way, that's too bad; I hate to think of Jericho drawing attention to itself in its present state. However, I suppose we must accept our predicament as unavoidable. Eventually someone would notice our . . . absence."

Morton was trying not to look at Ilona Wainwright, but was not succeeding. "Your absence," he repeated as if the words made no sense at all.

"Certainly we have to contend with . . . many problems here. Once the mill closed, there was so little to hold on to, you must see. The mill, directly or indirectly, accounted for more than half the employment in Jericho, which meant that a sort of domino effect resulted from the closing. There have been some businesses that have been able to hold out, but generally we have not a wide enough economic base to keep the town going. Which is why I've been extending credit to so many of the villagers through my personal fortune, which is quite extensive."

"Hewlett is of the old school," said Ilona with a fond glance at her husband. "I sometimes think that was why he wanted to marry me."

"Oh dearest!" Hewlett Wainwright guffawed. "I didn't care what you were or who you were or anything else about you; I cared only that you wanted me as much as I wanted you." He paused and turned toward Morton. "It was a second marriage for me; my first wife died ten years ago. She — my first wife — was the daughter of my father's closest business associate. You might say that our marriage was set from birth, and you



# There are places in my homeland that appear to be on the far side of the grave.

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would not be far wrong."

"You're worse than the old aristocracy," said Ilona fondly.

"Be that as it may. The second time I married, Mr. Symes, I married to please myself, and when I brought my wife back here to Jericho, I was the happiest man in the world." He indicated the parlor. "It's no Carpathian castle, but it's not a hovel, either."

"Carpathian castles are cold," said Ilona. "More than half of them are in ruins." She looked at Morton with a strange expression in her mesmerizing eyes. "You think this place has become lifeless — you know nothing of it. There are places in the mountains of my homeland that appear to be on the far side of the grave, so lost are they."

"Don't exaggerate, my dear," Hewlett Wainwright asked with a playful grin. "Every part of Europe has some village or ruin that makes Jericho seem lively."

"I suppose so," said Morton dubiously. He had another taste of the whiskey, and hoped he could keep his head clear. "It must have seemed strange, coming here after living in Europe. There is so much history in Europe."

Ilona smiled, this time widely. "We make our own history, don't we?" She turned her head as a small, shapeless woman bustled into the room with a little tray. "Here's the cheese. I hope you enjoy it, Mr. Symes."

Morton looked at the hard yellow cheese and did his best to appear interested. "It's fine." He was glad he had had a little to eat before coming to this meeting, and at the same time felt so hungry and uncomfortable in this strange company that he hardly cared that the cheese looked almost inedible.

"I'll cut you a slice, if you like," offered Hewlett Wainwright, motioning the maid away. He picked up the cheese slicer and set to work sawing. "You'll find this has a lot of character. Not many places you can get this kind of cheese today."

"I see," said Morton, accepting the long shard of cheese laid across a dry cracker. "Thanks." It was quite a job getting through the cheese and cracker; in the process he consumed most of the whiskey only to make

the other swallowable. His head rang, but he did his best to smile as he set his glass aside. "You're very gracious. Tell me more, will you, about how the town ran into financial difficulties? Wasn't that two years ago?"

Hewlett refilled his glass as he embarked on a complicated tale that would have been hard to follow if Morton had had all his wits about him. As it was, he discovered that he was not able to make sense out of most of it, though he had a general description of a mill unable to keep up with modern big business, and a town that lived on its bounty; it was theme and variation on what he had already learned, but told with more convolutions. Still with or without the embellishments, the story was basically a simple one: when the mill was closed, jobs and money disappeared, and most of Jericho was lost.

"My husband has made it more cut-and-dried than it is," said Ilona when Hewlett at last paused. "He hasn't mentioned his own role in preserving the place. His personal concern for the village has provided a livelihood for many of those who have remained here."

"But . . . but they haven't filed their taxes," said Morton, doing his best not to slur this statement.

"They had no reason," said Hewlett. "Most of them had very little income. There was nothing to report."

"But you know better than that," protested Morton, striving to keep his thoughts clear enough to continue. "We have to know when there is nothing to report, just as when there is. It's the information that's crucial — don't you see? The government cannot provide needed assistance if there is no record of the need — don't you see?" His head hummed like a shell against his ear, the sound that was supposed to be like the sea and was not. "We have to be able to show that the circumstances have changed, that you are not . . . taking advantage, or. . . ." He swallowed hard and tried again. "If you have new problems, there are other consequences than. . . . Don't you see: if you haven't made money, then there are fewer penalties for not filing. But you have to file — don't you see?" He knew he was repeating himself, but was unable to stop himself. That one phrase — don't you see — was stuck in his thoughts, persistent as allergy sniffles, and he could not rid himself of it.

"No," said Hewlett. "Oh, I've read the publications, but I cannot see why it is essential for you to have paperwork for no reason, because we have no money to report. Why, even the police chief and his assistant are

paid from my personal accounts, not from the village budget, because those coffers are empty. If you like, they're the village's private security force now, and as such are my employees." He looked at Morton. "Would you like a little more whiskey?"

"Not right now," said Morton, who was astonished when Hewlett put a bit more in his glass.

"Just in case you change your mind," said Hewlett. "More cheese?"

The room grew darker as the three of them conversed. Morton soon began to lose track of what he was trying to say, and after a while, that no longer bothered him. He noticed that his host and hostess hovered close to him, which he decided was flattering, since it was not typical of New Englanders. He could feel them bend over him, and he tried to think of an adequate apology for his bad manners, for he was more than pleasantly tipsy. He knew he ought to make an excuse for his behavior, but he could not string the words together sensibly. He was simply aware of stretching out on the sofa — unthinkable behavior! — and of Ilona Wainwright fussing with his tie to loosen it, her eyes boring into him as she did.

"Not too much, my dearest," Morton heard Hewlett say. "Not all at once, remember."

Whatever Ilona had answered was lost to Morton, who felt overcome by fatigue, unable to move or think. He tried to explain how sorry he was, but, to his intense chagrin, he passed out.

He woke in the Ivy Room of the Jericho Inn, his clothes neatly put away and his pajamas on, the blankets tucked under his chin. It was midmorning, to judge by the position of the square of light from the window. Morton rubbed his eyes, groaning as he moved. He started to sit up, but stopped as dizziness made the room swing; he lowered his head and sighed. He damned himself roundly for getting drunk, and he shuddered at what the Wainwrights must have thought. He moved again, more slowly and gingerly, and this time made it to his elbows before vertigo took hold of him. "Damn it," he muttered. "Damn, damn, damn."

The few times he had drunk too much, he had been left with a thumping headache and a queasy stomach, but never before had he felt weak. As he made himself sit up, his arms trembled with the effort, and a cold sweat broke out on his chest and neck. "This is absurd," he said to the wallpaper, embarrassed at how little strength he had, and how much work

it took merely to drag himself to his feet. With a concentrated effort, he got out of bed and, steadying himself against the wall, he went toward the little bathroom, breathing as if he had just run two miles.

His waxy pallor surprised him, and the dark shadows under his eyes, as if he had been beaten. Morton stared in the mirror, appalled at his own wan features. His hands shook as he did his best to shave, though when he was through, he had several minor nicks, including one on his neck that bled more persistently than the others. As he toweled his face dry, he inspected the cuts and dotted them with iodine. How was he going to explain this to Brewster? he wondered. How was he going to account for his failure to gain the needed information? What excuse could he offer for his conduct? He puzzled over this, his wits moving more slowly than his body, as he dressed. Belatedly, he remembered he had to drive to the bank in North Poindexter to get his cash. The thought of such a journey left him troubled, but he knew he had to go there before he ran out of money, and he had to be there this morning, or Brewster would be curious and critical.

There was no one in the lobby of the Inn when Morton made his way down the stairs, and the street, once again, appeared all but empty. A face appeared at the window of one of the offices near the general store, but aside from that, there was no one to be seen. Morton got into his chocolate BMW and started it cautiously, wincing as the engine erupted into life. Ordinarily he would have taken pleasure in the sound, but not this morning. He drove off at a sedate pace, and once on the two-lane state highway, he did not risk going faster than forty.

By the time he reached North Poindexter, the worst of his dizziness had gone. His hands still felt weak, his thoughts seemed disordered, and his eyes squinted against the sun, but he no longer felt as if he could not keep steady. The busy, narrow streets pleased him, and he almost enjoyed having to hunt for a parking space.

The senior teller had Morton's voucher for cash, and after checking his credentials and getting his signature on the necessary documents, gave him eight hundred dollars. "Odd, you needing cash," she remarked as she slipped the papers into the appropriate files.

"Yes it is," said Morton, adding, "Can you recommend a good place for lunch?" Now that he had said the words, he decided he was ravenous. It was not just the drink, he realized, that had made him so much not

himself, but the lack of food. Whiskey and no supper, and no breakfast. No wonder he had felt poorly. "I want something more than a sandwich," he went on.

"Well," the senior teller said, "I don't know what to tell you. There's Edna's down the block; they're quite good, but they're pretty much soup-and-sandwich. Then there's the Federal Restaurant. That's expensive, but the food is good, and they have a large lunch." She looked at him more closely. "We don't have much in the way of fancy eating in North Poindexter."

"You have more here than in Jericho," said Morton in a tone that he hoped was funny. "That place was —"

"Jericho?" echoed the senior teller. "You mean you've been over in Jericho?"

"Yes," said Morton, baffled at the peculiar expression in the senior teller's eyes. Speaking the word carefully, he asked, "Why?"

"Oh," said the senior teller with a belated and unconvincing show of disinterest, "it's nothing — the place is so remote, and with the mill closed and all. . . ."

When she did not go on, Morton grew more intrigued. "Has there been trouble in Jericho? Other than the mill closing and people being out of work, I mean?"

The senior teller shrugged. "You know how people say things about places like that. It's gossip and rumors; all these little places in New England have some of it. They're glad to think the worst of villages like Jericho, so their own place seems better." She lowered her voice. "It's not as if I believe what they say about the place, but it is spooky; you'll give me that."

"I wouldn't use that word, perhaps," said Morton with caution, "but I can understand why someone might."

"Yes; well, you see why there are stories about the place. Most of them sound like some kind of horror movie, you know; one of those George Romero things. You hear about weird creatures, or worse than that, roaming the streets, preying on decent folk. It's silly. It's just talk. It's because the place is so . . . empty." She made a dismissing movement with her hands. "I probably shouldn't be saying this. It's not at all responsible."

"I appreciate it," said Morton. "It's always disconcerting to be in deserted places. While I've been there, I don't think I've seen more than a

dozen people. During the day, there's almost no one around, and in the evening, the people on the streets don't say much. I think having the mill gone makes it all so precarious that they don't like to talk about it."

"Probably," said the senior teller, and moved away from him. "I'm sorry, but I got work to do."

After Morton ordered a generous lunch at the Federal Restaurant, he caught up on his report, trying to gloss over his misbehavior the night before. "I don't know," he muttered as he read what he had put down, "how else to account for it."

"Did you say something?" asked the waiter as he brought calves' liver and onions with a spinach salad on the side. "More coffee?"

"Yes, please," said Morton, adding, "And a glass of tomato juice, if you would."

"Naturally," said the waiter, departing at once.

When he had finished his lunch and indulged in an excellent carrot cake with extra raisins, Morton decided he was getting better. Food was what he had needed. He no longer felt as light-headed as before, and some of his strength was returning. "That'll teach me to skip dinner," he said softly as he paid the bill.

Before he drove back to Jericho, he stopped to get some protein snacks: jerky, a few slices of ham and turkey, and a box of crackers. He had his hard-boiled eggs, and this ought to make things easier for him.

The police chief, a bulky man everyone called Willy, regarded Morton's identification askance. "I wondered when you'd be getting around to me," he said, his accent ringing with the flat vowels of New England and the east coast of Britain. "I don't know what I can do for you, and that's a fact."

"It may be," said Morton, feeling restored and just guilty enough to persevere with his investigation. "I have to ask. I hope you appreciate that."

"Of course," said Willy with resignation. "What do you need to know?"

"First, I need to know how many people have moved out of Jericho in the past eighteen months." Morton drew out his notebook and made a show of getting ready to write down the information.

"Oh, four, maybe five," said Willy after giving his answer some thought. "No more than that."

Morton stared at him. "That's absurd."

"Preacher Stonecroft, he left; him and his wife, that is. They went, oh, more'n a year ago. Sad to lose them, but the way things are around here. . . ." He indicated the window, as if the view of main street provided the explanation. "They weren't our sort, not them. So they left."

"I see," said Morton, trying to guess why this man was lying.

"Over a year ago. So did the minister; he took those two orphaned boys and went west. That was before the Stonecrofts left, by maybe a couple months." Willy looked at his three empty cells visible through the open door.

"Also not your sort?" Morton ventured.

"That's right. And the two boys probably needed to get out, with their folks newly dead and all." Willy sighed. "Henry and Dinah Hill."

"They were the boys' parents?" Morton asked, finding the police chief's remarks a bit hard to follow.

"Yeah. They died, and Reverend Kingsly took them away. He said it was for the best. He might have been right," said Willy.

"Where did they go?" Morton wanted to know.

"West," Willy told him, with a wave of his hand in that direction.

"But where west? Don't you know?" He would have to tell Brewster about Reverend Kingsly; somehow it ought to be possible to trace the man and the two orphans.

"He didn't tell us. I don't think he knew." Willy sighed. "Not that we hold it against him, you understand. In a case like his, he had to leave."

Morton scowled. "How do you mean, in a case like his?"

"The way things were going. Churchmen have to have a congregation, don't they?" Willy sighed again, this time letting his air out slowly.

"And because the mill closed, people stopped going to church?" Morton asked, and decided at once that what the chief of police was trying so politely to say was that there was no money to support the churches in town; with the Wainwrights paying the villagers out of their own pockets, there would not be much left for the two ministers.

"Well, it wasn't quite like that, but. . . ." He looked toward the window again. "This isn't a very big place; it's never been a very big place. Things get hard in a town like this. We know what it's like to be cut off."

"You mean your isolation is working against you?" Morton asked, hoping he had interpreted Willy's remark accurately.

"Well, some of us think it works for us, but it's all in how you look at

it." He nodded twice. "I can't give you much more, Mr. Symes. You've seen Jericho for yourself; you know what it's like here. No matter what the government does, things aren't going to change here a whole hell of a lot, if you take my meaning."

"Yes," said Morton, not at all certain he followed Willy's implications. "Do you think you'd have time to draw up a list of the names and addresses of those people still living in town?"

"Still living?" repeated Willy. "Sure, I can do that."

Morton gave him his best stern but sincere smile. "Thank you very much for your help, Willy. I know this can't be easy for you."

"We get by," said Willy as Morton let himself out of the police station.

**A**T THE diner, Morton made a point of having a second order of pot roast and a dish of ice cream for dessert. He noticed once again that no one else was in the place, and this time he said, "Is it always this slow?"

"Most folks around here like to eat in," said the waitress without looking at him. "You know how it is."

"Yes," said Morton, thinking that at last he did.

"We keep to ourselves around here, especially since the mill closed." She regarded him with taunting eyes, the rest of her apparently consumed with boredom.

"It has had serious repercussions for the town, hasn't it?" Morton looked at the waitress once, then gazed toward the window so that she would not feel he was questioning her too closely.

"It's one of the things," said the waitress. "There are others."

"Yes," Morton said at once. "Of course there are." He paid for his supper and left a 22 percent tip, more than was allowed, but he wanted to let the waitress know he appreciated all she had told him.

As Morton went out the door, the waitress called after him, "You've not found out everything yet."

Morton paused, his hand on the latch. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," she responded. "Think about it."

"Of course," said Morton, wondering what she intended to imply. He thought about it as he stepped out onto the street, feeling a peculiar exhilaration from the darkness he had never experienced before. He strode back toward the Inn, but found himself reluctant to return to his



room. Inadvertently, he was drawn to the Wainwright house, his thoughts disordered as he looked up at the faded grandeur of the mansion.

"Mr. Symes," called Ilona from a second-story window. "How nice to see you again."

"Thank you," said Morton, overcome with a sudden and inexplicable rush of desire that left him all but breathless. His pulse thrummed; his flesh quivered; he seemed to be burning with fever and locked in ice all at the same time. It was most improper for him to stand staring up — and with such naked longing in his face — at the aristocratic features of Ilona Wainwright.

"It was a pleasure to have you with us last evening," she said, her red lips widening in a smile.

"You're very . . . kind," Morton faltered. What was it about this woman that aroused him so intensely? What fascination did she work on him, that he felt drawn to her in a way he had thought existed only in fantasy? And how could he ever account for his reprehensible behavior to Hewlett Wainwright?

"Not at all," Ilona said, her voice low and seductive. "I only wish to . . . to entertain you again." She stepped out onto the little balcony that fronted her window. "Will you come in?"

"I . . . I don't know. . . ." Morton was almost certain he was blushing, and that made his embarrassment more acute. "Is your husband at home?" He could hardly believe that he could be so callous, so impolite to speak to her that way. He moved back a few steps. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Ilona asked, and that single word was as thrilling as a symphony.

"It's . . . it's all very awkward," Morton began. "You see, Mrs. Wainwright, I don't . . . that is, I ought not. . . . It would not be right to take advantage of you." Be sensible, he told himself. This woman is older than you, and she is married. You have no right to want her; you have no right to speak to her. It is wrong for you to do this.

"Is something troubling you, Mr. Symes?" she asked, and there was the faintest suggestion of haughty laughter in her question.

Morton squared his shoulders. "I have an obligation as an investigator for the IRS not to abuse my position, which is what I would probably be doing if. . . . It would be unforgivable of me to use my . . . power to . . . to compromise you." As he spoke, he moved closer to the house.

Ilona appeared not to have heard him. "It has been so long since there

was someone new in the village; I have been beside myself, wanting to meet someone new. Will you come in?" She leaned down, one long, pale hand extended. "I would be so grateful to you, if you would come in, Mr. Symes."

"But . . ." All the protests he had intended to make faded from his lips. "Certainly, if you would like that."

"Very good, Mr. Symes," said Ilona, her smile growing more vivid. "You will find the side door, there by the conservatory, open." With that, she left the balcony.

Morton all but fell through the door in his eagerness to see Ilona. Though part of his mind still tried to reason with him, to make him resist the favor that Ilona appeared to offer, it was quickly stilled as Ilona herself came into the sitting room, her face alight with anticipation. Morton made one last attempt to break away from her. "It's wrong of me to be here. I owe you and your husband. . . ."

"If you believe you owe us something, all the more reason for you to stay," she said, coming to his side and resting her head on his shoulder. "How vigorous you are. How the life courses through your veins."

That odd compliment puzzled Morton, but not for long; Ilona turned her face to his, and her carmined lips fastened on his as she seized him in a surprisingly powerful embrace. Morton stopped thinking and gave himself to delirious, erotic folly.

It was almost time to phone in his report when Morton woke in his bed once again. His dizziness had returned threefold, and his weakness was far greater than it had been previously. Morton put an unsteady hand to his forehead and tried to organize his thoughts before he made his call to Brewster.

"You sound as if you're coming down with something," His superior observed critically after Morton commenced his report.

"I think I might be," Morton allowed. "I feel . . . drained." He sighed. "I wish I understood it."

"Have the doctor check you over before you come back to the office; I don't want you starting something with the other investigators."

"Of course not," said Morton, then got on with his report. "According to the chief of police, not very many people have left town, though I personally have seen few of the remaining townspeople. If they still live here, they must work somewhere else during the day."

"You say the town is empty?" Brewster demanded. "Make yourself plain, Symes."

"Yes sir," said Morton, squinting to read his notes. "It might as well be a ghost town during the day."

"I see," said Brewster in his best significant voice. "And where do you think the people work?"

"I want to find that out," said Morton, stifling a yawn. "I don't think it's North Poindexter, if that's the issue. I'm fairly certain that they're not going there, judging from how people in North Poindexter regard Jericho."

"All right," said Brewster. "And how is that?"

"They seem to think that this is a very strange town, that the people here are odd and their ways are old-fashioned or something of the sort." He leaned on the wall beside the pay phone. "That doesn't sound like a lot of people from Jericho work there, does it?"

"Probably not," was all the concession Brewster would make. "From what I've seen, this place is . . . growing in on itself. It's caught — you know how some of these little places get when the main industry falls through? Remember that town in West Virginia that sort of dried up when the factory that made chairs went under?"

"You do not need to remind me," said Brewster stiffly. "And you think this is another Lambford, do you?"

"Well," said Morton uncertainly, "I'm not positive, no, but it looks likely. If you could send a formal request for records and the rest of it, the bank president will show me the accounts here, but he won't do it without the paperwork. Which is his right, of course. I need a few more days to get all my facts together, and to see what the bank president can offer me" — unbidden, the image of Ilona Wainwright came to his mind, a vision so intense that he was not able to speak for three or four seconds, and he covered this up with a cough — "and . . . take some time to . . . assess what I find."

"What's wrong? You get yourself attended to before you get any worse," demanded Brewster.

"Allergies, I think. It's probably allergies," Morton improvised. "I guess I should take another pill."

"Don't neglect it. We don't want to have to pay hospital bills for you," said Brewster as if he were speaking to a fractious six-year-old.

"I don't want to be any trouble," Morton assured him at once. "Pollen

does it, and there's pollen in the fall."

"Yes," said Brewster in a tone that indicated he had heard more than enough about all of Morton's problems. "I will see that the proper documents are sent to the bank by express, or courier, if that's necessary. That should be sufficient for your purposes."

Morton nodded to himself. "I don't think that Mr. Wainwright will refuse any request if it's made properly and officially, but he has the interests of his depositors to defend, and it's proper for him to do it."

"If that's all, Symes?" His tone implied that he did not need Morton Symes to teach him his job.

"For the time being," said Morton, one hand to his head. "I'll call again day after tomorrow. And you'll have my written reports when I get back." His head was ringing now, and every word he spoke crashed through his skull.

"Keep your medical records separate from the rest. We'll have to review them for reimbursement." He paused, then bade Morton a stiff farewell and hung up without further ado.

After his phone call, and sitting in the empty lobby for almost half an hour, Morton was barely able to walk the short distance from the Inn to the diner, and when he got there, he sat for some time staring at the menu, its offerings of corned beef and cabbage so uninteresting to him that he actually felt slightly sick as he read it. Corned beef and cabbage, and doubtless it had been boiled to the point of falling apart, the cabbage nothing more than tasteless vegetable goo. Finally, when the waitress came to take his order, he turned bleary eyes on her. "Is there any chance you could get me a steak, a rare one?"

"Steak?" said the waitress, a fleeting, ferocious look at the back of her eyes.

"Yes; you know, a slice of cow, singed but bloody." He put his elbows on the table, astonished at his own dreadful manners. "I'd like it soon, if you can arrange that."

"What about hamburger, singed but bloody?" asked the waitress, not quite mocking him.

"Fine," said Morton, but with a touch of regret; he had anticipated the satisfaction of tearing into the meat; that was not possible with hamburger. He waited for nearly fifteen minutes before the waitress came back with a plate of raw chopped beef and all the makings of steak tartare.

"I thought you might like this a little better," said the waitress with an expression that just missed being a leer. "I'll bring you some French bread to —"

"Never mind," said Morton, whose hunger grew painfully intense as he looked at the mound of raw beef. "I'll manage." It shocked him to listen to his harsh words; he never treated people the way he was treating the waitress. He could not imagine what had come over him, and decided that it had to be the effect of his allergies, or whatever was making him so abominably weak. "I don't suppose that you suffer from allergies."

"Allergies? Not me." The waitress laughed nastily. "So you got allergies?" She did not wait for him to answer her question, but turned on her heel and left him with his steak tartare.

**B**Y MORNING, Morton was feeling quite restored. His sight no longer blurred if he moved quickly, and his headache had decreased to bearable levels. He almost passed up the two hard-boiled eggs that were delivered to his room by the sullen clerk, then forced them down so that he would not have another episode like the last. He had decided today he would have to inspect the bank records; he hoped that Hewlett Wainwright would not be too difficult about his requests. At the memory of his illicit meeting with Ilona, he cringed and wondered how he would be able to face her husband. He tried to direct his concentration back to the job he was entrusted to do, but Ilona intruded on all of it, her elegant, sensuous presence insinuating into the world of figures. Finally Morton set his reports aside and decided to pay a visit to the post office. If the documents he requested were there, he could get on with the work; he wanted to believe that his infatuation would diminish as he gave himself over to his task. Romance and tax forms rarely mixed, he decided, and thought of the many times he had found his affections waning as his enthusiasm for tracking down tax inconsistencies waxed. How he longed for his computer screen and the safe haven of dependable, sensible, bloodless figures. The impression of Ilona Wainwright's curving mouth and brilliant eyes could be exorcised by columns of numbers.

There was a single, aged clerk at the post office, a man of a uniform gray color, from his hair and eyes and skin to the sweater and trousers he wore. He monosyllabically refused to say whether the documents had come from the IRS for Hewlett Wainwright, and when pressed, closed the

shutter in front of his counter.

Reluctantly, Morton started toward the bank, his eagerness fading with each step. He did not know how he could face Hewlett Wainwright with his guilt; Ilona was his wife, his wife. Morton had never allowed himself to be drawn into associating with a married woman before, and the realization that in a town as small as Jericho, secrets were impossible to keep gave him more dread than the possibility of Brewster's wrath.

"Good day, Mr. Symes. Morton!" Hewlett Wainwright came out of his private office effusively. He gestured to the one teller on duty. "How good of you to have those letters sent. I can't tell you how it relieves me. This way I have not compromised my depositors, have I?" His voice boomed through the vaulted room. "Come back to my office, and we can go over the records."

Morton was nonplussed by this exuberance, and he hesitated as he took the bank president's hand. "Why, thank you."

"You're looking a trifle less robust today. You don't mind my mentioning it, do you?" He guided Morton into his office. "You're the only game in town, and so you —" He broke off as Morton stared at him.

"The only game in town?" Morton said, appalled at his conflicting emotions.

Hewlett folded his arms. "A joke, a kind of pun, Morton. You . . . you're in demand because of it."

To his chagrin, Morton blushed. "Mr. Wainwright, I don't know what to say to you. I never intended to do anything incorrect, and you must believe that —"

Hewlett clapped Morton on the back. "We don't worry about incorrect here, not now." He indicated his visitor's chair. "Do sit down. And let me get the records you want. They're very old-fashioned. We don't have many computers in town these days."

"Since the mill closed," Morton supplied.

"No, not that," Hewlett said, frowning. "What did you used to do on Saturday afternoons when you were young, Morton?"

This abrupt change of subject made Morton blink. "Uh . . . I was a Boy Scout. We did nature walks and things like that."

Hewlett cocked his head. "Around here we went to the movies. Our mothers would take us over to the theater in North Poindexter and leave us while they went shopping and out to lunch and to the hairdresser and

all the rest of it." He folded his hands. "Didn't you ever go see *Godzilla* or *Firemaidens from Outer Space*? Or *Dracula*?"

"No," Morton admitted, wondering what Hewlett Wainwright was attempting to tell him. "Sometimes we went roller-skating, but my family believed that children should be outside, doing wholesome things when we weren't in school."

"A-ha," said Hewlett seriously. "And you never sneaked off on your own?"

"Not for that, no," said Morton, more puzzled than ever.

Hewlett drummed his fingers on the table. "What do you think of Ilona's . . . appetites?"

Morton felt his face grow hot. "I . . . I never meant to do anything that you —"

"It doesn't matter what you meant," said Hewlett grandly. "It matters what we want."

"I didn't intend for —" He stopped, staring at Hewlett and noticing for the first time that the bank president was really quite an impressive figure of a man. "I'll leave at once, if you find me an embarrassment. I'll arrange for another investigator to come."

"You'll do that in any case," said Hewlett with calm certainty. "Because it is what we want."

"And. . . ." He let the single word trail off. "I'll leave," he offered, starting to get to his feet.

"I'm not through with you yet, Morton, and neither is Ilona. We can still have something from you, and we intend to get it. We're so very hungry." He leaned forward over his desk.

"Hungry?" Morton repeated, having trouble following Hewlett once again.

For the first time, Hewlett became impatient. "Damn it, man, are you really as ignorant as you appear? Are you really unaware of what has happened to you?"

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about. And if," he went on, suddenly certain that all these peculiar side steps were intended to keep him from his investigation, "it's your plan to withhold the figures the IRS has requested, you're going to be very disappointed."

Hewlett shook his head. "There is no point to this investigation. It doesn't apply to us, not now."

"The rules of the IRS apply to everyone, Mr. Wainwright," said Morton with a sudden assumption of dignity he had not been able to find until that moment. "You understand that even when a town is in difficulties, we cannot make an exception of the people. It's not to their benefit. Everyone has to file income tax. Those are the rules."

Hewlett laughed, and this time there was no trace of joviality in the tone. "Death and taxes, death and taxes. It appears we are not allowed to have the release of death."

"When you die, your heirs will have to file for you in order to let us know that you are dead. Until then, I'm afraid you're all in the same situation as the rest of the country." Morton rose unsteadily. "If you don't mind, I have records to examine. I'm willing to do it at the Inn, if you'd rather."

"Morton, come to your senses," Hewlett ordered, his manner becoming very grand. "Don't you know what's happened to you? Haven't you guessed what you've stumbled upon?"

"I wish you'd stop these melodramatic ploys," said Morton, his face becoming set. If he had felt a little better, he might have taken some satisfaction in setting Hewlett straight. "Your town could be in a lot of trouble, and there's no way you can get out of the consequences now. You can't decide not to file income taxes, Wainwright. That's not your decision to make."

"Isn't it?" Hewlett rose to his feet, his face darkening. "We're vampires here, Morton."

Morton stared; he had never heard so bizarre an excuse for failure to file. "What? Nonsense!"

"At first," said Hewlett resonantly, "there was just Ilona and me, but here in Jericho, we had our pick, and those we chose, chose others. Recently we've had to get by on . . . windfalls. Like you, Morton."

"Like me?" Morton laughed nervously. "Don't make your case any worse than it is. Just give me the records, and let me do my job. And don't try that kind of a farrididdle on —"

Hewlett shook his head, anger changing his expression to something more distressing than it had been. "You think I am lying to you, Morton? You believe that I've made this up?"

"It's ridiculous," said Morton flatly. "You'll have to come up with something better than that. And if you persist with so absurd a story, you



will not find the IRS at all sympathetic. We try to be responsive to the predicaments of those taxpayers who are experiencing financial setbacks, but you're mocking our policy, and that will not work to your benefit." He touched his forehead, wishing he did not have a headache.

"And what will you think when you start desiring blood?" Hewlett asked, his tone jeering now. "How do you plan to explain that?"

"Your threats mean nothing to me," said Morton.

"Wait until the next full moon," said Hewlett. "You'll be in for a shock then." He smacked his desk with the flat of his hand once. "For your own benefit, Symes, don't be too hasty. You're at risk now, and once you join our number —"

"Oh come off it!" Morton said, heading toward the door. "I am not going to indulge you in this travesty of yours, Wainwright. If you had been candid with me, I might have been willing to extend myself on behalf of this town, but under the circumstances — circumstances that you have created, Mr. Wainwright — there is no reason for me to do anything more than file my report and let the law take its course." Without waiting for any response, he strode through the office door and across the lobby.

From his place behind the desk, Hewlett Wainwright called out, "Wait for Ilona tonight, Symes. There is still a little wine left in your veins. Then wait for the full moon."

Morton considered leaving Jericho that very afternoon, but his fatigue was so great that he did not trust himself to drive on the winding, narrow roads as daylight faded. He occupied himself for the remainder of the day updating his reports and adding his own observations to the facts he had discovered. For the most part, he dealt very indirectly with his discoveries, but when it came to Wainwright's ludicrous claims, Morton hesitated. Matters would go badly enough in Jericho without the additional condemnation of the bank president's sarcasm. Morton decided that it was not proper for the entire town to suffer because the bank president was making insulting and outlandish claims. There would be other ways to deal with Hewlett Wainwright; the townspeople had more than enough to contend with.

Dusk turned the Ivy Room dark, and Morton finally set his work aside. He knew he ought to go out for a meal, but his headache was worse, and it appeared to have killed his appetite. He went down to the lobby and asked

for a pot of tea to be sent up along with some rolls. Then he tottered back up the stairs and promptly collapsed on his bed. His thoughts began to drift, and soon he was in that strange half-dreaming, half-waking state where his perceptions were pliant as Silly Putty.

In this state, it seemed to him that he got up once again and went down onto the street, where he saw dozens of townspeople waiting in silence as he went toward the Wainwright house. He recognized the chief of police and the waitress who had served him his supper, but the rest meant nothing to him, almost having no faces. Morton sensed they were watching him, though only a few were bold enough to do it openly. There was a brazen hunger in their faces that might have petrified him had this not been a dream. He kept moving.

Ilona Wainwright was in the overrun garden, standing beside a shapeless bush Morton did not recognize. There were a few long flowers hanging on its branches, giving off a sensuous, sickly smell, cloying as overly sweet candies. Ilona, in a trailing lavender dress, smiled and held out her arm to him — part of Morton's mind wanted to laugh at Ilona for not wearing black — beckoning to him.

With the townspeople so near, Morton could hardly bring himself to move. He was compromising himself, his investigation, and the IRS by this infatuation with a married woman. It was one thing when their relationship was a matter of conjecture, for then he had recourse to plausible deniability. Once their trysts were known and seen, there would be no such means to refute any accusations made against him. He trembled as he looked at her; when she called his name, he succumbed.

How cold her arms were, and how she held him! The only thing lacking in the passion of her embrace was warmth. By the time they broke apart, Morton was shivering.

"You must come inside; let me warm you," said Ilona in her lowest, most seductive tone.

"I . . ." Morton could not break away from her.

"Come inside," she coaxed, going toward the open door that led from the garden into what had once been called the morning room.

Morton went with her, and passed into deeper sleep, to wake in the morning pale and ill, feeling as if he had spent the whole night in an endless fistfight, which he had lost. It took more than five minutes for him to get up, and when at last he did, he was more disoriented than he

had been previously. He blinked stupidly, and stared at the atrocious wallpaper as if it might be ancient undeciphered writing rather than a bad representation of ivy leaves. Gradually his thoughts began to piece themselves together, each one adding to the sensation of vertigo building in him, and making him feel queasy.

"Got to get up," he said to himself, then fell silent as he heard the thready noise he made. God! he thought. This is more than allergies. I must have some kind of flu.

That was it, he decided as he pulled himself out of bed and felt his way along the wall. He had picked up some kind of virus, and it had distorted his perceptions. Yes, that explained it. The town was in trouble, no doubt of that, but because of the disease, he was making more out of their troubles than existed. In the bathroom he stared in the mirror at his haggard features, then opened his mouth very wide in the hope that he might be able to see if his throat was red. The angle was wrong, and he could see nothing, though his throat was sore, and his head was full of thunder. He started to shave, doing his best to handle the razor with his customary care.

This time he managed not to nick himself, but his hands were shaking visibly by the time he put the razor away. His bones seemed without form, as if they were made of Jell-O instead of bone. He lowered his head and reached for his toothbrush. Another hour, he said to himself. Another hour, and I'll be gone from here, gone away. I'll make an appointment to see the doctor tomorrow. He considered that, then decided that he had better choose a different doctor, one who was not connected to the Service, so that if he had anything seriously wrong, it would not get back to Brewster. As he finished with his teeth, he began to feel the first stirrings of satisfaction.

The sour-faced clerk was not at the desk, and it took Morton some little time to find him.

"I have work to do," the clerk announced, holding up the handle of his broom to make the point.

"I'd like to check out." He held up the key. "My bags are in the lobby."

The clerk sighed as if he were being asked to undertake all the labors of Hercules. "So you're going," he said as he started toward the hallway.

"Yes," said Morton, doing his best to be pleasant.

"Going to tell them Infernal Revenuers that Jericho's down the drain, is

that it?" His rancor was more for show than any strong feeling. "What'll they do to us?"

"I don't know," said Morton seriously. "My job is to investigate. There are others who make those decisions." He wiped his hands on his handkerchief before he looked over the bill that the clerk presented to him, all entries in a crabbed little hand.

"But you got to make recommendations?" said the clerk.

"I have to make reports. Others will do the evaluations." He nodded as he checked the math. "It looks fine. How much more do I owe you?"

The clerk named the figure, and Morton presented him with the appropriate amount, then looked around the lobby. "This could be such a pretty place. I can't understand why you don't do something with it. Towns like this one can be real tourist attractions if you go about development the right way." It was only a friendly observation, but the clerk looked at him, much struck.

"Mr. Symes," he said as Morton struggled to lift his bags. "What did you mean by that?"

Morton was starting to sweat; it embarrassed him that he could not do so little a thing as lift his bag without coming near fainting. "I meant . . . this place . . . is authentic. The setting . . . is beautiful." He put the suitcase down. "If you handled it right, you could develop some seasonal income, anyway."

The clerk nodded several times. "And there'd be a lot of people through here, you say?"

"In time." Morton had another go at hoisting his suitcase, and did rather better now.

"I'll take your things out to your car," said the clerk in an offhanded way. "No need for you to be puffing like that. Though a young man like you —" He left the rest of his remark to speculation.

"Thanks," said Morton, and turned his luggage over to the clerk. "You know where my car is."

"Sure do," said the clerk. "Look, when you get back to wherever your office is, can you find out what they'd do to us, I mean the IRS, if we wanted to turn this village into a tourist place?"

"I'll try. Who knows," he added with more encouragement than sincerity, "I might want to come back myself one of these days." He winced as the bright sunlight stabbed at his eyes; his dark glasses were

taken from their case at once and clapped over his face.

"Shows good sense," said the clerk, nodding toward the glasses. "Light can be hard on a fella."

As Morton opened the trunk, he observed, "I had the impression that . . . pardon me if I'm wrong . . . that the people in Jericho aren't interested in change, and they wouldn't like turning this place into a tourist town."

The clerk shrugged. "Well, the mill's gone, and we're pretty damn stuck. I can't say I want to make it all quaint, but we got to eat, like everyone else." He finished stowing the luggage and slammed the trunk closed for Morton.

Morton offered a five-dollar bill, which was refused. "You find a way to make sure we get some new blood in here — that'll be more than enough." He stood back as Morton got into the car.

Morton started the engine and felt a touch of satisfaction in the muffled roar. "Someone else from our office will be contacting you soon."

"We'll be waiting," said the clerk, and to Morton's amazement, the man licked his lips. "Make sure you save a few for yourself."

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Because he could think of no appropriate reply, Morton put the car in gear and started away, waving once to the clerk before he rolled his window up. Perhaps, he thought, Jericho would not be as difficult a place as he had feared. Perhaps there were things that they would accept as necessary and reasonable change in order to continue their town. He rubbed the little raised welts on his neck as he swung into the first big bend in the road. At least he had broken the ice; he could provide some explanation of what had happened — other than the ridiculous tale Wainwright had told — that would make it possible for the townspeople not to be encumbered with an unpayable tax burden. On the whole, he was satisfied with his job, though the episodes, real and imagined, with Ilona Wainwright made his conscience smart. But with a beautiful woman like that, one so irresistible, he supposed many men had fallen under her spell at one time or another. How ludicrous to call her a vampire. If he had remained there much longer, he might have started to believe it. Hell, he might be persuaded that he was one, too. "Absurd," he said out loud. The welts continued to itch, and he scratched them without thinking as he started down the lazy decline toward North Poindexter.

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# F&SF Competition

## REPORT ON COMPETITION 55

In the December issue, we asked you to think up clichés of the future. The response was good (there are more clichés in the world than we thought). The entries that worked best were the ones that *sounded* like clichés. Too many entries read as if someone were writing them for academic journals. (Such as "Biterminal combustion of the paraffinic illuminator" instead of "burning the candle at both ends.")

### FIRST PRIZE

- You can lead a Creationist to science, but you can't make him think.
- Bombs have more funds.
- Look before you delete.
  - Kirk McCartney  
Fremont, NE

### SECOND PRIZE

- Borrowing from Watson to pay Crick.
- Cloning is the highest form of flattery.
  - Randy Hall  
King of Prussia, PA

### RUNNERS UP

- Always an astronomer, never an astronaut.
  - Deirdre Gerken  
Brentwood, MD
- Curiosity killed the cat, cryogenics brought it back.
  - Fred Borman, Jr.  
Baltimore, MD

- A moving neutrino gathers no mass.
  - Thornton Kimes  
Seattle, WA

### HONORABLE MENTIONS

- If you can't fax something nice, don't fax anything at all.
  - Joan Garbutt  
Philadelphia, PA
- If at first you don't succeed, push the reset button.
  - Jacqueline Ireland  
Reno, NV
- Great minds are programmed alike.
  - Victoria Pless  
Mocksville, NC
- An idle mind is television's playground.
  - Craig Blomgren  
Tucson, AZ
- It's a wise child that knows its own major genotype donor.
  - Elizabeth Graham  
Wilmington, DE
- A watched planet never terraforms.
  - Bill Gerken  
Reston, VA
- Caught between Chernobyl and a test site.
  - David S. Theil  
Boulder, CO

COMPETITION 56 (suggested by Hal Frank and Corinna Taylor)

**MUSIC FOR THE MOVIE VERSION:** In honor of the Academy Awards, we decided to think in cinematic terms. Yes, we know that the Academy gives an Oscar for the Best Original Song, but what happens if they added Most Appropriate Song as an extra category? In this month's contest, we would like you to pick best *existing* song for the movie version of your favorite science fiction or fantasy work. For example:

"How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" for A BOY AND HIS DOG.

"If I had a Hammer"" for LUCIFER'S HAMMER.

Send us your entries by April 15.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by April 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 56 will appear in the August Issue.





# Fantasy & Science Fiction

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STEPHEN KING ISSUE: Limited edition of F&SF's December 1990 issue has a special cover stock and is available for only \$10.00, plus \$1.50 p/h. Mercury Press, PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

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## Coming Attractions

**W**AIT UNTIL you see the cover for our May issue. Artist David Hardy has illustrated **Rob Chilson's** spectacular novella, "Far-off Things." Rob, who is best known for his hard science fiction stories, brings a touch of whimsy and fantasy to his first appearance in F&SF. "Far-off Things" is a tribute to classic writers from Jonathan Swift to Herman Melville, with a sense of wonder that stories from the Golden Age of Science Fiction always had. "Far-off Things" masquerades as hard-core far-future SF extrapolation, but is, in its author's words, "closer to Edgar Rice Burroughs' pseudo-scientific fantasy." A literary treat you won't soon forget.

Then, just in case you thought *we* had forgotten the horrific side of the world, **F. Paul Wilson** shows up with one of the creepiest stories ever penned. "Bugs" also masquerades as science fiction, but the horror appears very, very soon, and doesn't let up until the last paragraph.

The true science fiction in the issue comes from **Terry Bisson**, who just won the Hugo and the Nebula in the short story. (Which doesn't, of course, overshadow his previous accomplishment, winning the World Fantasy Award for his first novel, *The Talking Man*.) Terry explores a future where the ozone layer is gone and the sun is something to be feared. "Next" is that challenging kind of science fiction story most often found in the late 1960s, the kind of story that uses the future to force us to examine the here and now.

The future of F&SF has never looked brighter. **Kate Wilhelm** dropped her latest novella, "Naming the Flowers," by the Eugene office just last week, and **Jack Williamson** sent in the first short story he's written since 1988. Jack is going into his seventh decade as a science fiction writer, and we're proud to have this most recent tale. Upcoming issues will also feature work by **Charles de Lint**, **Brian Aldiss**, **Bradley Denton**, **Jonathan Carroll**, and **Paul Di Filippo**, so keep your subscription current. The May issue goes on sale April 1.

THERE'S SOME ARGON HERE, BUT NO RADON.

I THOUGHT RADON LURKED IN BASEMENTS

BUT IT'S SO COLD AND DARK DOWN HERE. SAY, THERE'S A LITTLE XENON ON THE STAIRS.

THE IGAD<sup>\*</sup> IS GETTING EXCITED



\*DR. QUARK'S OWN INVENTION: THE INERT GAS DETECTOR.

JUST AS I SUSPECTED... KRYPTON SKULKING BEHIND THE FURNACE.

IS IT TRUE THAT KRYPT..

A MYTH. A SILLY MYTH.

HIS KRYPTON IS A ROCK OF SOME KIND. REAL KRYPTON SOLIDIFIES AT  $-273^{\circ}\text{C}$ . COLDER THAN HELL.

THIS IS WHAT I WAS HOPING FOR. RADON?

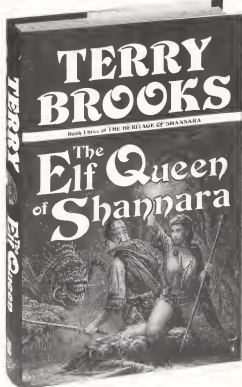
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